

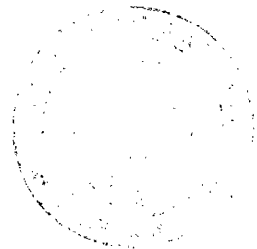
# ASO OKE:

THE EVOLVING TRADITION OF HAND-WOVEN TEXTILE  
DESIGN AMONG THE YORUBA OF SOUTH-WESTERN  
NIGERIA

BY

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of PhD in History of Art at the School of Oriental and African  
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## ABSTRACT

Aşo òkè is the name given to cloth woven for ceremonial use among the Yorùbá-speaking people of south-western Nigeria. The thesis explores the production, distribution and consumption of this cloth through an account based on field research supplemented by archival and secondary sources. The first chapter suggests that the notion of tradition and its relation to both continuity and processes of change is a productive way of appreciating key aspects of the role of aşo òkè in Yorùbá life. The following chapter looks at the history of weaving technology and of hand-woven textile design in the region. Following on from this the weavers' compound is documented as the currently dominant form of production organisation for aşo òkè, with the focus moving out from a single compound to a wider picture of weaving in Òyó and beyond. The growing movement of young women into aşo òkè weaving is discussed in the fourth chapter, after which an account is given of the fundamental importance of women cloth traders in promoting design change. In particular their recent role in stimulating an influx of Ewe weavers from Ghana to compete in the aşo òkè market, and the far-reaching impact of these developments on the design repertoire of Yorùbá weavers is documented. The penultimate chapter covers the consumption of aşo òkè, moving from an account of historical controversies over issues such as cultural nationalism and the role of *aşo egbé* or group dress, to an exploration of the use of the cloth in ceremonies in the 1990s. The conclusion highlights the continuing importance of individual and often idiosyncratic innovation throughout the production, distribution, and consumption of aşo òkè.

## Preface

Research for this thesis was funded by the British Academy and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, with additional support for field work and the purchase of samples from the Central Research Fund of London University, and from the Museum of Mankind respectively. I would like to express my gratitude for all their assistance.

Field research in Nigeria was carried out between April 1995 and August 1996, with additional shorter visits in April 1994 and May 1997. During this period the focus of research was on the documentation of design change in a single weavers compound, Ilé Èkẹjọ Adéşína, in the city of Òyọ, which was visited daily between June 1995 and June 1996. I would particularly like to thank Alhaji Moshood Fasasi, Alhaji Rasak Kareem, the weavers, and all the other residents of Èkẹjọ compound, for the patience, friendliness, and hospitality. Over the same period all the other master weavers in Òyọ were interviewed and visited in their compounds and at the market, and I would like to single out their Chairman Alhaji Oriolowo Olatunji for thanks both for his own assistance and that of his colleagues. I am extremely grateful also to all the master weavers, weavers, cloth traders, and numerous others who patiently agreed to be interviewed in other cities including Lagos, Ìbàdàn, Ilorin, Ìsẹyìn, Šakí, Ogbómòşó, Ifẹ, and Ìjẹbu-òde, amongst whom I would especially like to thank Chief (Mrs) Owolana and Mrs Patsy Agbakwu in Lagos, Alhaja Mariamo Oloruntobi in Ìbàdàn, and Alhaji Keganhe of Ìsẹyìn. None of this would have been possible without the capable assistance and translation skills of my two friends and assistants Prince Segun Adeyemi and Niyi Odekanyin.

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In conclusion I would like to express my appreciation to John Picton, who guided me through the preparation of this thesis with his customary humour, wisdom, and knowledge.

Note on Presentation:

All Yorùbá words except personal names have been fully tone-marked wherever possible. In direct quotations the tones follow those given in the original text. Yorùbá words, with the exception of *aşo òkè* are printed in italics. The font used is AfroRoman, supplied by Linguist's Software (PO Box 580, Edmonds, WA 98020-0580, USA)

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## Chapter One - Introduction

### **Chapter One:**

#### **Cloth, Identity, and Tradition: Aṣọ òkè in the flow of time.**

Amid the crowds and clamour of Lagos in the 1990s the presence of hand-woven cloth may easily be overlooked. Yet the characteristic lurex glitter of contemporary aṣọ òkè, narrow-strip hand-woven fabric from the Yorùbá-speaking southwest of Nigeria<sup>1</sup>, catches the sun as cloths are hung out to air on numerous balconies. In middle and upper-income residential districts tiny signs discreetly announce “Aṣọ Òkè Dealer” while twenty or so stalls are piled high with neatly bundled sets of cloth strips in Jankara market on Lagos island. Occasionally the long brightly-coloured warps of a small cluster of working looms stretch out across a dusty forecourt on a back street. Elsewhere the rattling of weaver’s shuttles may be heard from behind the high walls of an expensive and well-protected house. Amongst the half-built breeze-block structures of the city’s ever-expanding suburbs small groups of Ewe weavers from southern Ghana have set up their looms. On a Sunday morning visit to one of the huge new Pentecostal churches springing up in converted warehouses across the city one may see shiny aṣọ òkè headties among the array of elegant hats. At a night party at the Eko Club, celebrating a wedding perhaps, or a family patriarch’s seventieth birthday, the majority of the thousands of guests will be wearing locally produced hand-woven cloth. Groups of twenty or more celebrants share the same design, the caps of the white robed men matching the shawls and headties of the women. In cities and towns further north, particularly those such as Ìsẹ̀yìn, Ìlọ́rín, and Òyọ́ in the heartland of the C16th -19th Òyọ́ Empire, numerous men work full time as weavers in their family compounds.

It is soon apparent then that in contrast to the virtual obsolescence of so many of the art traditions of pre-colonial origin, the weaving and wearing of narrow-strip cloth continues to be a vital, thriving aspect of contemporary practice in the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria. Indeed the 1990s have seen two major changes which are rapidly transforming both the design of the cloth

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and the organization of cloth production. Since the middle of 1994 major design innovations, notably the weaving of wider strips of cloth and the use of a technique known as supplementary warp float, have had a far reaching impact on the appearance of *aşo òkè*. At the same time the family or compound-based organization of cloth production is increasingly being challenged by the movement of young women into narrow-strip cloth weaving. This is a phenomenon which began unnoticed back in the 1960s but has taken on a dramatically increased momentum in the 1990s. Although it would be tempting to assume that these two developments are directly related, that an opening up of the industry to new sources of recruitment has lead to a greater readiness to experiment with “non-traditional” designs, we will suggest that this is not in fact the case. For reasons that will become clear it is actually male weavers working in long established businesses who are most responsive to novel design. Moreover, we shall argue that a misunderstanding of the nature of “tradition” has contributed to a downplaying of the extent to which the apparent persistence of old forms, both of design and of organization, has masked long-standing processes of change. In tracing the multiple paths of these processes it will prove necessary to look beyond the weavers alone in order to follow the “total trajectory from production, through exchange and distribution, to consumption” (Appadurai 1986:13).

As will become apparent, following these paths should be seen not as fixing in place a definitive account of some concrete system but as a necessarily provisional and partial view of fluid, constantly developing processes of multiple influences and interactions. The relationship between these processes and the context with which they are interwoven is complex. It has long been clear that there is no simple one to one correspondence between artifacts of material culture and neatly bounded ethnic entities (Kasfir 1984). While the term “Yorùbá” often serves in the literature as a vague art historical shorthand for a number of more or less closely related local forms in a disparate range of media found in the southwest of Nigeria, of which wood sculpture is generally taken to be the preeminent expression, its use is far from

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unproblematic. It is the name given to the various dialects spoken by the majority of residents in the area encompassing the current states of Lagos, Òsun, Ògùn, Òyó, Oñdó, Èkìtì, and Kwara in the Nigerian federation. As Standard Yorùbá, the written form developed from Samuel Ajayi Crowther's mid-nineteenth century Grammar and bible translations and was subsequently promulgated through schools, newspapers, and other media<sup>2</sup>. On certain occasions and in certain contexts it serves as a term of ethnic identity and self-identification and as such it is a key factor in the political contestation of resource allocation within the contemporary Nigerian state. It is however, only one focus of identification today, alongside others that include family, occupation, religious affiliation, town (both home town and current residence), local government area, state, region, and nation state. Although I shall argue that the notion of "Yorùbá" is in fact a relevant context on several levels for our consideration of *aṣọ òkè*, this can by no means be taken for granted. At this stage it should be taken more as a heuristic assumption than an assertion.

In academic discourse the status of the term "Yorùbá" is also a site of contestation, in this case between social historians and what might be called neo-essentialists. On the one hand the richness of data available on post 1850s history has made it the paradigmatic case through which the missionary, colonial and post-colonial cultural construction of ethnic identity may be demonstrated<sup>3</sup>. On the other the same richness of data has enabled other scholars to elevate a construction of Yorùbá culture into an essentialised and often ahistorical master discourse that tends to mask real processes of cultural change and differentiation. Local scholars have made major contributions to both these schools of thought, although ongoing processes of cultural nationalism have tended to incline the majority towards the second tendency. To an extent these approaches are different facets of the same process, an ongoing cultural expansion of a notion of Yorùbá that, like the recipients of the *oríkì* chants<sup>4</sup> documented by Karin Barber (1991), swells and is empowered as the focus of a concentrated stream of attention.

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Part of this stream of attention is a growing body of literature devoted to the subject of textiles<sup>5</sup>. Apart from a programmatic intention to demonstrate that textiles in Africa are a subject at least as worthy of sustained consideration as more familiar topics of Africanist art historical inquiry such as sculpture or masquerades, why add to this literature ? The study of African textiles and dress in general, and *aşo òkè* in particular, provide a medium that supports a challenge to much of the received wisdom that still dominates the perception of African art. At the same time, many of the propositions<sup>6</sup> underlying the recent focus on fashion as a cultural system may be cast into a new light by a different perspective on the relations between dress and identity.

*Aşo òkè* weaving is a craft that utilizes indigenous technology to produce a cloth that has successfully resisted the challenges of government-sponsored attempts to “modernize” weaving techniques<sup>7</sup>, and of industrial textile competition from several centuries of imports and more recently from factories established in its own heartland<sup>8</sup>. The number of full-time professional weavers is certainly higher today than it was 20 years ago, and perhaps the highest it has ever been. These weavers are kept employed working for a wholly indigenous patronage, with virtually no tourist or expatriate demand. The cloth woven is deeply embedded in local culture, having an important role in a wide variety of circumstances, from life-cycle ceremonies to masquerade costumes, medicines to sacrifices, yet it incorporates plastic thread and responds rapidly to changing tastes. Skills have been handed on from one generation to the next within weaving lineages yet the industry is open to new recruits, both male and female. Its history long predates any close economic involvement with capitalism, yet there is no evidence of the “ideas of benevolent spiritual or ancestral involvement in the production process” that Weiner and Schneider (1989:11) suggest is typical of pre-capitalist textile production<sup>9</sup>. The cloth utilizes a limited repertoire of decorative techniques, some of which are named, yet it is resistant to any iconographic or symbolic decoding. In short it is a tradition that conforms to few of the clichéd expectations of outside observers.

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After reviewing the dubious legacy of European preconceptions of African “traditionality” in the study of African art John Picton notes “Each tradition has its history, a history that must take account of the nature of the tradition itself. Traditions vary enormously in their creative expectations. Some are certainly conservative in that the replication of existing forms is expected. Other traditions permit and perhaps encourage exploration in form and medium - it is within such traditions that we can expect to find innovative development” (1992:39). That it is the nature of the tradition of *aşo òkè* weaving to at least permit exploration in form and medium has long been apparent. As far back as 1858 the Baptist missionary William Clarke commented “scarcely any two pieces of cloth are found of the same size and colour, as each weaver is continually striving to turn out something extra or fanciful” (1972:273). At the same time however *aşo òkè* weaving does, despite Clarke’s enthusiastic endorsement of the apparent variety, contain an expectation that existing forms will be replicated. Indeed it is hard to conceive of any tradition in which there was no dimension of replication at all - what would there be to hold it together as a tradition rather than a random accumulation of diverse objects or practices ? As George Kubler observed (1962:72) “Each copy has adhesive properties, in holding together the present and the past.”

It is the ability of *aşo òkè* to perform this dual role<sup>10</sup>, to combine in one constellation of social practice, even in one cloth, the fanciful and the familiar, to hold together the present and the past, that provides a key to understanding it as a tradition in a living, evolving, sense. There are two interrelated dimensions in which this duality is manifest, in the weaving and in the wearing of cloth. This thesis will endeavour to explore both of these and to trace out the nature of the inter-relatedness between them through an account which will highlight cloth design and the processes of both continuity and change in designs which are the material representation of this adhesiveness of present and past. With this in mind, the next chapter will provide background data relating to the history of *aşo òkè* weaving in the region before considering the nature of design

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change over the last 150 or so years. Subsequent chapters will explore the detail of the emergence of cloth design from the production and distribution process by way of studies of established compound-based organization of weavers, the changing role of women in *aşo òkè* weaving, and the contribution of cloth traders and the system of marketing. The final chapter, on the wearing of *aşo òkè*, provides an account of the active contribution to the process of cloth design made by consumers in the context of a consideration of the role played by *aşo òkè* in the construction of personal and group identity in a rapidly changing society.

Moving away from the legacy of “presentism” in functionalist anthropology<sup>11</sup> and the notion of the “ethnographic present”, the sense of tradition we have in mind returns to that described by Raymond Williams (1983:319) as “a description of a general process of handing down, but there is a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty.” There are thus two aspects to this, the actual process of handing down, and the attitude to the past that accompanies it. We will therefore need to consider the contexts with which *aşo òkè* is interwoven in some detail in the following chapters in order to establish as closely as possible just what is being and has been handed on, and the actors in this process. What are the actual mechanisms of continuity and change ? At the same time we must consider what are the ideas about the role of the past that are at work. Are the same ideas being restated through time, or is there any evidence that attitudes towards the past are themselves changing over time ? Are there different types of attitude apparent in different contexts ?

That the past does indeed provide a charter for action in the present, and that this charter is in some manner connected to actual events in the past, rather than being merely a construction out of nothing by interests in the present, would seem to be evident. This is not of course to deny that the processes by which this takes place are manipulated and constructed in terms of the interests of current actors, merely to note that there are rules and limits to this process (Appadurai 1981). That this view is held by at least some actors in the



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historical process in the Yoruba region is quickly demonstrated to any researcher by the regular parade of *Ọba*, kings, and their secretaries consulting the colonial records compiled during past chieftaincy disputes and stored at the National Archives in Ìbàdàn.

Fabian (1983) has demonstrated how the categorization of societies in terms of a panoply of exotic conceptions of time is all too often a constituent element in a construction of Otherness, a denial of coevalness with the researcher's own society. If, as J.D.Y. Peel suggests, the *Ìjẹ̀ṣà* Yorùbá sense of "past in the present" involves static, cyclical and linear conceptions which are deeply interwoven and do not relate to different sphere's (1984:128), this is, he also notes, not so different from the sense of the past underlying "some universal tendencies of history" evidenced in works from France and England. One of the most interesting aspects of the development of *aṣọ òkè* over the last century is precisely that throughout the whole period it has been merely one element, albeit an important one, in a total set of dress possibilities that has also embraced, at least for some, the latest in European fashions, from the Victorian attire of Lagosians in the 1890s, to the vogue for Tommy Hilfiger designer wear amongst wealthy Lagos youth in 1995.

A leading Yorùbá art historian, Rowland Abiodun, has recently considered the nature of the concept of tradition in the Yorùbá language. His comments are worth quoting at length. "The word *àṣà* in Yorùbá can mean either 'style' or 'tradition.' *Àṣà* is broadly conceived as any set of ways, approaches, or practices that characterize a person's behaviour or mode of work of a group of people or a period. The noun *àṣà* is formed by adding the prefix *à* to the verb *ṣà* (to pick or select many or several things from a collection or an available range of options), a normal nominalisation process in the Yorùbá language. Because tradition arises from the kind of choices persons make with respect to social, political, religious, and artistic modes of expression, it makes sense to hypothesize that *àṣà* (tradition) derives from *àṣà* (style). Moreover, the uses of the term *àṣà* as 'tradition' and 'style' are related in meaning and not necessarily opposed to each other in Yorùbá art and thought. When used in the

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context of Yorùbá artistic discourse, *àṣà* refers to a style or the result of a creative and intelligent combination of styles from a wide range of available options within the culture. This is the reason that *àṣà* whether as 'style' or 'tradition', is never static and cannot be, since the concept of *àṣà* already embodies the need for change, initiative, and creativity." (1994:40).

The introduction of the Yoruba term *àṣà* then, introduces a slight shift in meaning and emphasis, from a passive receipt of something that it handed on, to an active selection. This is useful in directing our attention to the present, and to the actors in the present, who are actively engaged in selecting, in choosing those elements from the past which will be reproduced. To the question of what is handed on, we need to add that of, what are the mechanisms through which selections are made and by whom. We need to be careful with this notion of selection however since it risks misreading the nature of artistic creativity. The formation of a tradition may not merely be about choosing from a set of options already realised in the past, nor even from an infinite number available in the present<sup>12</sup>. Rather it can be as much about expanding those possibilities and creating new ones. So we also need to ask in what circumstances innovation occurs, and what is the context for this aspect of creativity.

In discussing Yorùbá ideas about creativity Professor Adepegba (1983:61) notes that *àrà*, meaning "anything novel", is normally used in combination with the verb *dá*, to create. The phrase *dá àrà* may mean any of the following: create novelties; perform wonders, especially in the case of magical feats; make patterns on any craft object; embellish, decorate, or make acceptable, and set a fashion. This is an interesting list and I think already provides us with evidence for a view of creativity that moves beyond simply selecting from a previously existing set of options. Those who embellish craft work are expected to perform wonders ! Not least among the merits of Adepegba's article<sup>13</sup> is that he begins to explore some of the contexts in which the word is actually used, for example in the exclamation made when

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confronted by something unexpected: “*Àrà ní kò rí o rí*” meaning “wonder or novelty, I have never seen you before.” (ibid).

Our understanding of the *aşo òkè* tradition, then, should encompass the creative exploration of change, as well as a process of selection from those aspects handed on from the past. The sense of respect or duty that may be felt towards the selected aspects of the legacy of previous generations, serving to legitimize aspects of the past in the present, may however be extended to cover other aspects of the tradition of more recent origin. In the case of *aşo òkè* we will see that the processes of temporal change, in so far as the cloth itself is concerned, are not usually denied. Indeed, as the vocabulary of creativity just discussed indicates, they are welcomed and praised. The aspect of recently elaborated tradition arise more when we consider certain of the contemporary practices of *aşo òkè* consumption, which we will suggest, rather than being facets of some essentialised Yorùbá identity, arose in the context of the process J.D.Y. Peel described as “the cultural work of Yorùbá ethnogenesis” (1989) since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Respect for certain aspects of the past, or those assumed to represent the past, is not however inconsistent with the rejection of other features of the same ancestral past. Both attitudes are implicit in the process of selection Abiodun tells us underlies the sense of tradition in the Yorùbá language. The rejection of much of the past and the welcoming of progress and development are expressed in the concept of *òlàjú*, literally “opening the eyes” but used metaphorically as “enlightenment” (Peel 1978:144) and often glossed as “civilisation”. In Bùnú, a small district at the extreme northeast of the Yorùbá-speaking region with a long history of women’s weaving, *òlàjú* has meant the gradual displacement of locally woven cloth by imported factory-produced textiles, *aşo òyìnbó*, accompanied by new fashions in everyday dress. Very little cloth is still woven but old cloths are treasured for use in a variety of ritual contexts, including as women’s marriage cloths and in the funerals of chiefs. These old cloths and the ceremonies in which they are used have become the focus of efforts to preserve a sense of Bùnú identity in a

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changing society (Renne 1995), while the use of factory cloth and imported clothing is a vehicle for the expression of *òlájú*. As we have noted, *aşò òkè* continues to thrive, whilst the more localized women's weaving traditions of Bùnù and elsewhere are virtually obsolescent. We return to that distinction noted by John Picton (1992) between traditions reliant on the replication of existing forms, which seems to have been the case, at least in the 20th century, with the weavers of Bùnù, and those which encourage novel variation. Unlike these localized traditions, *aşò òkè* may be expressive of the present as well as the past, its openness to change making it a part of the currency of *òlájú*, alongside factory cloth and European dress styles.

We will return to a consideration of what attitudes towards both the past and the present are being embodied and reproduced in the wearing of *aşò òkè* in the concluding chapter of this thesis, drawing on a fragmented but informative Yorùbá discourse about cloth, dress and appropriate behaviour, expressed in a diversity of texts from a range of genres and media, embracing oral literature, cloth names, proverbs, newspapers, sociological, ethnographic, and art historical treatises. To conclude this introduction however, and to counterbalance the emphasis on change which is inevitable in any historical account, we will consider three cloths that are invariably associated by Yorùbá with the past, that serve today as the material anchor securing the *aşò òkè* tradition to a sense of the past. Fittingly we will introduce them with a quotation from the *Ifá* divination system, supposedly the ultimate paradigm of the past in the present through the ritualized retelling of the past as a precedent for action in the world.

<i>“Kíjìpá aşò òlè</i>	<i>Kíjìpá</i> is a lazy man's cloth
<i>Òfì aşò àgbà</i>	<i>Òfì</i> an elder's cloth,
<i>Àgbà tó kò bá rówó fì ròfì</i>	An elder who does not see money to buy <i>òfì</i>
<i>Kó ra kíjìpá</i>	Should buy <i>kíjìpá</i>
<i>Nítorípé sányán ni bàbá aşò</i>	Because <i>sányán</i> is the father of cloths,

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<i>Ẹ̀tù ni bàbá ẹ̀wù</i>	<i>Ẹ̀tù</i> is the father of garments,
<i>Àlàárì lo te lé e...”</i>	<i>Àlàárì</i> is next to it....

(Akinwumi 1990:22)

A distinction is drawn between *kíjìpá*, cloth woven by women on the upright single-heddle loom, and *òfì* here referring to *aşo òkè* (see note 1). By the time a man becomes an elder he is expected to have accumulated the good things in life, summed up as wealth, children, and good fortune, and therefore to be wealthy enough to buy the best cloth. Only a lazy or otherwise unfortunate elder, we are told, cannot afford to buy *òfì*. The verse then introduces three types of *aşo òkè*, *àlàárì*, *sányán*, and *ẹ̀tù*, describing them as the father of cloths, a terminology that in Yorùbá implies both temporal precedence and seniority in status. If one asks a Yorùbá weaver what cloths were woven by his grandfather, or if one asks someone what *aşo òkè* was worn in the past, one is always told the same names - *àlàárì*, *sányán*, and *ẹ̀tù*. Although there was in fact an elaborate repertoire of cloth names used in the past<sup>14</sup> these are often the only names non-professionals can recall.

*Ẹ̀tù* is a cloth made from very dark almost black indigo-dyed cotton, with very narrow warp stripes or check of a lighter blue thread. The name refers to the black and white speckled feathers of the guinea fowl. Originally woven entirely of hand-spun cotton, versions produced today usually use machine-spun thread or combine a hand-spun weft with machine-spun warps. *Àlàárì* was the name given to cloth that incorporated large amounts of the magenta waste silk formerly imported into northern Nigeria by the trans-Saharan caravan trade. Usually this was used in the form of warp stripes in an otherwise indigo-dyed cotton cloth, although it was later also utilized for supplementary weft-floats. Today the name *àlàárì* may be used to describe any predominantly magenta cloth<sup>15</sup>. *Sányán* is woven from a local wild silk. The cloth is beige, the natural colour of the silk, and the standard design incorporated a white central stripe about one centimetre in width. White silk could be obtained from the cocoons of some moths, and this could be used for the central stripe, but white hand-spun cotton was more common. Today it is

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still possible to obtain cloths where at least the warp is woven from genuine *sányán* but they are very rarely woven. Since at least the 1950s cotton imitations have been far more usual.

What accounts for the present prominence of these three cloths in Yorùbá conceptions of the past history of *aṣọ òkè* ? What is clear and well documented is that all three cloths were important in the network of inter-regional textile trade that developed throughout the Fulani-ruled Sokoto Caliphate in the first half of the C19th. *Àlààrì*, *sányán*, and *ẹ̀tù* were all used to make the range of large embroidered gowns used as “robes of honour”<sup>16</sup> in institutionalized patterns of tribute and gift-giving in the Fulani courts, a practice that was rapidly emulated by non-Muslim rulers and chiefs. The Yorùbá weavers of Òyó and Ìlọ́rín were on the southern margins of a complex trade system incorporating cotton farmers (some of whom worked slave plantations), spinners, weavers, indigo dyers, cloth beaters, tailors, embroiderers, and traders, extending from Kano to Bornu and beyond, as well as south to the Nupe and Òyó Yorùbá (Perani 1992). The Nupe were then the best known weavers of the three cloths, with Nupe weavers migrating to the Kano region (Shea 1975:22), while Yorùbá weavers were taken as slaves to Bida and possibly also Kano<sup>17</sup>. The Yorùbá names *àlààrì* and *sányán*, are derived from the Hausa *alharini* and *tsamiya*, while the Hausa and Nupe use the term *saki* or *zabo* (ie guineafowl) for *ẹ̀tù* (Perani 1992:109).

It would seem likely then that these cloths owe their current salience to their prominence in the nineteenth century when many of the current styles of Islamic-influenced male prestige dress were popularized. However an alternative theory was suggested in an interview<sup>18</sup> with one Òyó chief. Chief Taiwo, who bears the senior honorary title of *Ìkarùn*, concentrated in his explanation on *sányán*, arguing that local wild silk was the original material used by the Yorùbá for weaving, before they learnt the use of cotton. Whilst the limited knowledge we have of the use of raffia fibres and cotton on the upright single-heddle loom would tend to suggest that this may not be historically accurate, what is particularly interesting was the Chief's argument that the

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antiquity of the three cloth types was indicated by their correspondence to the three Yorùbá colour terms: “*pupa*, *funfun*, and *dúdú*; that is the red, white, and black. These are the original colours for the Yorùbás.” The three basic colour terms<sup>19</sup> in the Yorùbá language are *pupa* (red, yellow, orange), *funfun* (white, all pale shades, including beige), and *dúdú* (black, dark blue, dark brown, dark green). There are however an ever increasing number of other colour terms, some of which draw on similarities such as *àwọ ewé* (i.e. leaf coloured) for green, while others are drawn from English or Hausa. People, such as weavers or cloth traders<sup>20</sup>, who work with a wide range of colours, have a particularly extensive colour vocabulary of the type Okediji called “pidgin chromacy” (1990:16). More relevant here however is the question of whether there are widely shared Yorùbá ideas about colour which are associated with the use of the three cloths.

Okediji (ibid) sums up what appear to be fairly general associations of colours to temperatures, noting that *pupa* is regarded as warm or hot, *funfun* as cold, *dúdú* as cool. These ideas are reflected in the interpretation of the various colours associated with certain of the *òrìṣà*, the Yorùbá deities, for example black with Ọ̀rúnmìlà the divination deity and Èṣù the trickster, red with Ọ̀gún, god of iron and warfare, and white with Ọ̀bàtálá the creative deity whose name is often translated “lord of white cloth” (Okediji 1990:19, Aremu 1984). An alternative perspective is provided by Buckley in his structuralist interpretation of Yorùbá medicinal practice. At its most basic the structure of ideas, he suggests, represent the healthy fertile female body as the mixing of red blood and white semen concealed within black skin, the combining of appropriate quantities of red and white in secret concealed by a black surface being equated with health. Whilst this brief summary cannot do justice to the subtlety and detail of his rephrasing of his informants’ exegesis clear problems arise when he attempts to draw on the structuralist paradigm to propose a general set of oppositions in which he locates “homologous structures.” Arguing that unconcealed red and white are dangerous symbols of revelation, while black is a symbol of secrecy he proposes (1985:137) that black is to red and white as

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cool is to hot and as cultivated is to uncultivated, life to death etc. What is apparent however from the first set of this paradigm is the dangers of attempting to impose a preconceived theoretical framework of binary oppositions onto his Yorùbá data. A more productive way of thinking about the Yorùbá triad of basic colours is to see them as a threefold set, useful for dividing up all sorts of data into threes, but without themselves necessarily having any fixed symbolism that can be transferred uncritically from one context to another. Some Yorùbá farmers, for example, classified soil types into black, red, and white, in descending order of fertility (Ojo 1966:212), while one of Margaret Drewal's informants noted that an *Ifá* verse classified mystically powerful women into *ẹlẹye funfun*, who bring prosperity, *pupa* who bring suffering, and *dúdú* who cause death (1992:178). There are widely held symbolic associations between specific colours and certain concepts that function in particular areas of social and religious practice but they cannot be generalised into an essentialised Yorùbá theory of colour symbolism.

Even when we restrict our consideration to colours used in relation to cloth, it is not just white cloth that has, as Renne (1991:710) noted "polysemic and ambiguous qualities." Whilst in some contexts indigo-dyed cloth is associated with high status, as with *etù*, in others it is associated with concealed dirt and pollution (Euba 1986:16). To quote a Yorùbá proverb: *bí a dáşo fún òlẹ a pá a láró* (Delano 1966:40), "when you give cloth to a lazy man you should dye it with indigo." The red cloth of Şàngó the *òrìşà* whose *oríkì* include "owner of the red gown" may be dangerous, but this does not apply to the red camwood stained cloth with which mothers wrap their babies (Euba 1986:18). The three prestige cloths are available for use as symbols with referents to their colours as a threefold classificatory system but this is not in fact how they are usually used. The nearest example to this is the now defunct (except for 'cultural dances') girl's puberty ritual that used to be held regularly in the city of Oñdó. During the Obitan ceremony "an initiate would tie a white wrapper of *sányán* around her waist on top of which she would wear an expensive *àlàárì*, while her body would be marked with black" (Olupona



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1991:131-132). While Olupona's informants said that the cloths were to "treat her like a royal person" (ibid:148), he suggests, perhaps following Buckley, a colour symbolism where red and white correspond to blood and semen, arguing that the initiates are treated as if they are pregnant at the conclusion of the rite (ibid:153).

What is clear is that there is no single symbolic association that would allow us to go beyond a simple reading of colours as hot, cool, or cold, to decode a fixed meaning from a particular cloth whatever the context. The three cloths, *àlàárì*, *sányán*, and in particular *ètù* have taken on a more general association with high status which makes them a particularly expressive source of metaphorical allusion exploited through the range of oral literature, from incantations to proverbs. Particularly apposite is the linkage via metaphor of medicine and money, in an incantation accompanying the preparation of medicine for a man who has no cloths. The head of a guinea fowl (*ètù*), is added to the medicine with the chant:

*"Ètù ló ní kára ótù mi, morówó morówó létù ní kè"*

"It is the guinea fowl that says my body should be comforted, 'I see money, I see money', is what the guinea fowl cries." (Buckley 1985:153-4).

Buckley's suggestion that the name may be derived from the verb *tù*, to comfort, is supported by a folk etymology provided by a missionary in C19th *Ìbàdàn*<sup>21</sup> who stopped to preach to some weavers: "At one of these places is a weavers shop, where they are weaving a sort of cloth called *Etu* (to ease). I asked why it is so called. 'Because it is a valuable cloth and whoever you find using it is freed from poverty.' Ah! Because a poor man could not buy it therefore you called it so. But there is something more valuable than this cloth.." Clearly it was not just the Yorùbá who found the cloth a useful source of metaphor.

Proverbs are themselves a mechanism for connecting the past and the present. They are a means of citing the past as a precedent for action in the present that among the Yorùbá is considered particularly appropriate to elders. Among the proverbs that refer to *ètù* are several that stress the accepted Yorùbá

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sense of the high status indicated by wearing the cloth: *A kù dé fílà ẹ̀tù lásán: ó ní ẹ̀ni tí orí rẹ̀ẹ̀ -* One does not wear an ẹ̀tù cap at will, only certain heads deserve such a cap. (Owomoyela 1988:24); *Orí adẹ̀tù kò gbọ́dọ̀ rù ẹ̀rù mọ́ -* A head that has worn ẹ̀tù must not carry loads again (Akinwumi 1981:255). A third proverb notes that you should not attempt to outshine the organiser of an event, in this case by dressing better than he can: *Sìn mí ká lẹ̀ òde, ó lẹ̀ wọ aṣọ ẹ̀tù -* accompany me out, he went and put on an ẹ̀tù robe<sup>22</sup>.

Although there are no specific occasions on which the wearing of either *àlààrì*, *sányán*, or *ẹ̀tù* is either prescribed or proscribed<sup>23</sup>, there are widely shared ideas about their appropriateness for certain events. In particular these are events that are associated with the past, and with the continuity of tradition, such as chieftaincy ceremonies and important funerals. When Chief Taiwo received his title from the Aláàfin of Òyó in 1975, he and two other of the six men receiving titles was wearing *sányán*, while a fourth man wore *àlààrì* (the other two men and a woman wore lace.) Chief Jekanola, when he took the important hereditary title of Bábá Iyàjì of Òyó in 1986, commissioned new robes of *sányán*, *àlààrì*, and *ẹ̀tù*. Three large photographs of himself in the robes hang in the inner courtyard of his palace. The appropriateness of the three cloths for funerals is more problematic. Depending on the age of the deceased, the wealth of the participants, and the particular customs of the family a correctly performed funeral may extend over about a week, with further commemorations held at regular intervals later (see page 341). It is generally felt that if the funeral is for an elderly person then the culmination of a successful life may be marked by the deceased's children and grandchildren wearing robes of *sányán*, *àlààrì*, or *ẹ̀tù* at the burial. However, according to the 93 year old Chief Şobande<sup>24</sup>, many people today misinterpret this as a general gesture of respect to the dead elder, when in fact the cloths should only be worn during those parts of the extended programme when the family celebrate joyfully that they have survived to bury their father or mother correctly. The Chief stressed that they are cloths for "merriment" not for mourning. The same sense of celebration, and of wanting to mark a big

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occasion with a “big” cloth would accompany the wearing of *sányán*, *àlàárí*, or *ètù* by someone celebrating their seventieth birthday, or by the parents of the bride or groom at a wedding. At the same time the participants are of course conscious that they are celebrating in a way that is not just appropriate but that has been handed down to them as part of a tradition, the literal realization of which would be the wearing of a cloth that was inherited from one’s father or mother. The continuing salience of *sányán*, *àlàárí*, and *ètù* makes this possible - one Ọyọ chief I interviewed had worn an *ètù* robe inherited from his father to the weddings of all of his children - in a way that cannot be done with the more transient fashions of other old cloth designs.

As with all *aṣọ òkè* however, the cloths may continue to bind together the present and the past long after they are first commissioned or worn. It is not just factory printed textiles imprinted with photographs or dates that can serve as commemorative cloths (Akinwumi 1990). Although as we will see later the reality is often different, in theory Yorùbá people retain all the *aṣọ òkè* they have purchased, making their wardrobe a chronicle that can be read to recall the whole series of life cycle events of their family, friends and social groups. These cloths in turn should be passed on from father to son, or mother to daughter, and although most are rarely if ever re-worn, they serve as a physical memorial to the key events of a parent’s life. Locked away in a trunk or wardrobe they are the private complement to the array of photographs of family members at key events that almost invariably greets the visitor in the parlour of a Yorùbá home. One local tradition practiced in the city of Oñdó particularly emphasizes this commemorative role played by cloth. At a funeral of an elder his or her children would contribute a cloth comprising about 14 strips of *sányán*, called *aṣọ ẹni*. Before the cloth was used to wrap the corpse a single strip was torn off from the edge to be kept by the children<sup>25</sup>.



Figure 1: Aşo òkè that combines lurex with an allusion to the tradition of beige silk *sányán* weaving. Alhaji Moshood of Ilé Èkẹjọ and his daughter on the occasion of the naming ceremony for her first son, Òyọ 1996.

We will conclude this chapter by looking at a photograph, appropriately since photographs themselves are also a key means of bringing the past into the present in contemporary Yorùbá society. The Yorùbá word for photograph, or picture generally, is *àwòrán*, which Lawal (1996:99) suggests is a contraction of “*à-wò-rántí*”, literally “what we look at and remember”. In this particular image we look at an Òyọ master weaver, Alhaji Moshood, together with his daughter, on the occasion of the naming ceremony for her newborn child. They both wear *aşo òkè* outfits ordered for the large party that marked the event. The cloth is clearly not real *sányán* but equally clearly it refers to it via the use of beige machine-spun cotton, a shade that is still popular because it imitates the colour of wild silk. At the same time however the cloth utilizes pale gold lurex in a recently developed technique that combines a lurex warp (apart from narrow cotton stripes at the selvages to allow the cloth to be sewn together) with wide lurex weft stripes in a style known as *jakad* (ie. jacquard). When the Alhaji first appeared in this robe walking through the crowd at the

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party towards the stage, the lurex sparkling under the lights in the twilight, there was an audible stir of admiration. On an occasion marking the naming of a new generation his cloth had brought together the past and the present, *sányán* and lurex, in the context of a still living and evolving tradition.

### Notes:

1. Aşo òkè literally “cloth from above”, is interpreted by Yorùbá as either cloth from upcountry, the interior, or as prestige or high status cloth. Since the name contains both connotations it is not necessary to consider one as the “true” meaning. Additionally Peter Morton-Williams has indicated in conversation with John Picton that according to his sources “òkè” or hill alludes to the past, to ancestral time, from which the present represents a descent (John Picton, personal communication, 1997.) The term aşo òkè is sometimes used to refer to all locally woven cloth, but more commonly only to narrow-strip cloth, which is the usage we will adopt here. Particularly among the eastern Yorùbá, the term aşo òfì (literally “cloth of the loom”) is used instead. Depending on the context aşo òfì too may refer to all local cloth.
2. The growing body of scholarship on the Yorùbá speaking region contains numerous general surveys of which Eades' *The Yoruba Today* (1980) is still the most recent and useful. Little purpose would be served by recapping familiar background material here.
3. See Peel (1989), Doortmont (1990), Law (1996).
4. Barber (1991:75) *Oríkì* are complex allusive chants naming and recalling an individual and his or her family history.
5. See bibliography. Also Akinwumi, T.M. *The State of Yoruba Textile Studies* in Wolff et.al eds. 1996
6. See page 371 below. Also Hendrickson (1996:1-17)
7. From the 1940s the colonial government made a sustained effort to convert weavers throughout Nigeria to the use of handlooms of European design. See page 192 .

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8. In the late 1980s a factory called Kwaratex was established with American capital in the city of Ilorin, the home of the largest community of *aşo òkè* weavers today. It was to produce cloth specifically intended to compete with *aşo òkè*, combining lurex with simple warp and weft striped designs. By 1995 the factory was closed and it was no longer possible to find any of its output in the markets of Ilorin.

9. This “disenchantment” cannot be ascribed to the presence of Islam, since Dilley has documented a panoply of beliefs concerning protective spirits and sacrifices to looms among the Muslim Tukolor (Dilley 1987) in Senegal.

10. It would be tempting, but I think overly simplistic, to suggest that contemporary Nigerian society combines certain of the features of both capitalist societies and of the small-scale, and that would account for the hybrid nature of attitudes towards cloth use. This line of argument however both fails to do justice to the complexity of Nigeria’s participation in the modern world, and ignores the documented interest in changing fashion in earlier African and African diaspora societies. Noting that in the C16th and C17th “Africa’s trade with Europe was largely moved by prestige, fancy, changing taste, and a desire for variety” (1992:45), John Thornton cited one Wilhelm Muller. Muller, writing of the Akan state of Fetu, which he visited between 1662-9, complained “These heathens are so vain about what they wear that at one moment they like this new fashion, at another moment that, and whatever appeals to them at a particular time they must have, even if they have to pay twice as much for it. This is why so many goods remain unsold and are sent back to Europe at great loss”. (Jones 1983:204).

11. See J.D.Y. Peel 1984:112

12. Fabian (1983:62) makes this point as a critique of structuralism “Levi-Strauss assumes (much like the American cultural relativists) that a culture takes shape and identity by selecting a few among a practically infinite number of possibilities (as a language selects its significant sounds from an infinite number of possible sounds.) Such a view is not just methodological - proposing that culture is best described taxonomically - it is also ontological

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when it maintains that culture is created by selection and classification. It is a concept of culture devoid of a theory of creativity or production, because in a radically taxonomic frame it makes no sense to raise the question of production.”

13. Although the discussions by Yorùbá art historians of the terminology of aesthetics, design, etc are fascinating, there is a tendency to draw on particular genres of oral literature, in particular the verses of the *Ifá* divination system, as the primary source. Whilst this may serve to validate the claim that the concepts in question are culturally significant, it does not address the important issue of how, or even whether, they are actually used in normal discourse. Thus a non-native Yorùbá speaker is left uncertain of the extent to which they are reporting on an existing terminology (and if so used by who ?) or are engaged in the equally interesting and important task of constructing a meta-language for art criticism along the lines of that produced for linguistics by Ayo Bamgbose (1984).

14. See pages 152 and 328.

15. See page 57 for an account of local dyes to imitate the effect of *àlàárì* and *sányán*.

16. Renne (1986)

17. Shea writes “there is no question at all that Nupe weavers contributed a great deal to the development of the textile industry in Kano. It also seems likely that important innovations were brought about by contact with Kanuri dyers and Yorùbá weavers and dyers.” (1975: 22)

18. Interview: Chief Francis Taiwo, Ikarún of Òyó, 12/6/96, Òyó.

19. See Berlin, B. and Kay, P. (1969), *Basic Colour Terms*. This correspondence was first suggested in the literature by Prince (1964), and resurfaced recently in Wolff and Wahab (1996:11). Chief Taiwo was educated in the UK and is a qualified engineer but is not familiar with the academic literature cited above.

20. Cordwell (1952) pioneered the study of Yorùbá ideas about colour and most subsequent work has added only nuances to her account. She noted

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(1952:258) that “One of the most common associations of colour is with dyeing and the production of cloth” and that weavers and their families would omit “like” from comparative terms: “A weaver would say not only “the colour of this thread is aluko” but would also give the names of the different berries, leaves, and roots from which dyes are extracted, not as a description of the source of the colour but as colour names in themselves.” She noted that even at the start of the 1950s English names were increasingly common. Today, with the virtual abandonment of local dyeing, the system has changed, with some weavers names for shades now coming from the brand of machine-spun cotton. For example, while yellow is often just called *yàrà*, some weavers call it *aláàwọ̀ èsúú* after a type of bitter yam with yellow flesh called *èsúú*. Two shades of yellow, however, are called *aláàwọ̀ èsúú Celutex*, after the manufacturer’s name, and *aláàwọ̀ èsúú ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ* - *ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ* means “owner of birds” , called after the bird on the packet label.

21. Journal entry 7 July 1868, Rev. W.S.Allen, CMS Archives CA2 0198

22. Interview: Chief Şobande, Lagos, 13/3/96.

23. Although it has often been repeated in the literature that these cloths, and *sányán* in particular, were restricted to the king and senior chiefs, or even woven only within the royal palace (Ene 1964:132, Bray 1966:59) I have found no contemporary references to support this. Several apparently knowledgeable informants specifically denied that this had ever been the case and none of the weavers I interviewed had heard of it. However it may well have been true that very few people who were not kings or chiefs could afford to buy the most expensive cloths. There is evidence of sumptuary restrictions imposed in specific towns applied to imported items such as shoes, umbrellas, and velvet cloths. It may well be that there were localized instances of restrictions of this type applying to certain local cloths also.

23. See page 341 for a wider discussion of *aşo òkè* at funerals.

24. Interview: Chief Şobande, Lagos, 13/3/96

25. Akinwumi 1990:55



### **Chapter Two: Aṣọ òkè in temporal perspective.**

#### **The spread of the technology: towards a history.**

The fragmentary nature of the sources makes any attempt to reconstruct a history of the spread of weaving technologies in the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria somewhat speculative. A significant advance in the existing state of knowledge could only be achieved through a detailed investigation of the oral traditions of weaving lineages<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless an overview of the current evidence provides a useful background to our consideration of the related issue of the history of design change in aṣọ òkè weaving. Although we shall be focusing on one type of weaving only, namely the narrow-strip cloth woven on the double-heddle loom, an adequate representation of the context will require us to consider possible interactions with other techniques of cloth production. A brief diversion to introduce loom types is therefore an essential preliminary.

#### **Looms**

In addition to the double-heddle loom mentioned above two other types of handloom are currently in use in the area, which we will refer to as the single-heddle loom and the European handloom. Here we are following the lead set by Picton and Mack in classifying the looms under consideration in the Yorùbá region in terms of their shedding device, as either single or double-heddle, accepting their contention that this relates to the “essence of the weaving process” (1989:17) in a way that other modifying adjectives relating to the position of the loom, the gender of the weaver, or the type of fabric produced, do not. While other methods of classification (eg. Ling-Roth 1917:26, Lamb and Lamb 1980:25) may well be helpful in areas such as Sierra Leone where there is greater diversity of loom types, only one form of single-heddle and one of double-heddle loom were in use in the Yorùbá region

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in the pre-colonial period. The picture is only slightly complicated by the later introduction of European designed handlooms utilizing two or four heddle shedding devices, but these will be adequately distinguished for the purpose of this study by the rather vague term “European handloom.”



Figure 2. Yorùbá single heddle loom, Ìjẹbu-òde, 1996.

The single-heddle loom as used amongst Yorùbá-speakers is a variant of the family of vertically-positioned looms found throughout much of Nigeria and the border region of Cameroon, where a continuous warp is wrapped around a wooden frame fixed against a house wall as shown in the photograph above. Similar looms remain in use among Hausa, Nupe, Èbìrà, Igala, Edo, and Igbo peoples. With certain limited exceptions among the Ìjẹbu and Bùnú Yorùbá,

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and at the royal palace in Benin, this loom was used exclusively by women<sup>2</sup>. Picton and Mack (1989:68) note the similarity in the use of two shed sticks between the eastern Yorùbá and their Ebira neighbours, and between the single shed stick of the western Yorùbá and the Hausa. The close winding-on of the warp elements on this type of loom produces a cloth which in general is predominantly warp-faced, with different coloured warp yarns being used to create striped patterns. Distinctive localized traditions of prestige cloth design developed in many areas including Òwò, Ìjẹbu, and Bùnú. The width of the cloth usually varies between about fifteen and thirty inches, with the length generally between six and nine feet.

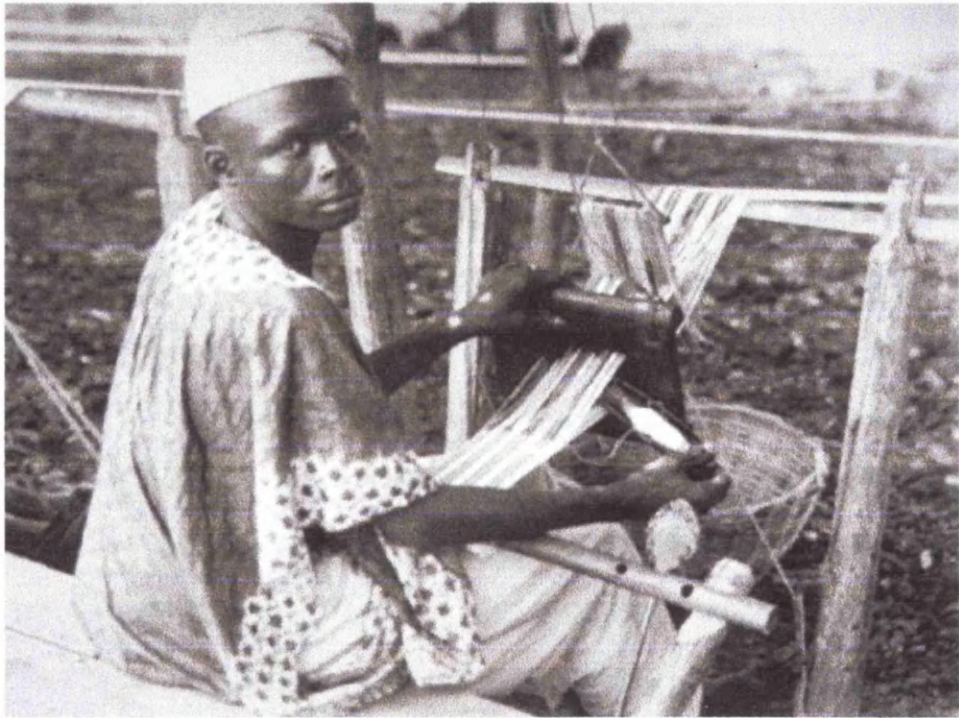


Figure 3. A double-heddle loom weaver in Abẹ̀dókúta. Taken in the 1890s this is the oldest photograph of a Yorùbá male weaver yet located. (Photographer Unknown, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive, London)

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The double-heddle loom found in the Yorùbá-speaking region is a member of the family of similar looms in use across a broad swathe of West Africa from Senegal to Lake Chad and western Cameroon although minor variations occur in details such as the shape of individual components<sup>3</sup>. Within Nigeria similar looms are or were used by various peoples including Hausa, Nupe, Kanuri, Tiv, and Jukun. The characteristic features of this loom are the use of a weighted drag sled to tension the warp, and the weaving of long, relatively narrow, strips of cloth. Once again the weave structure the Yorùbá produce on this loom is normally warp-predominant plain weave, with warp stripes the most frequently used design feature. Throughout the area of its distribution historical references indicate that this type of loom has been operated exclusively by men, but in recent years its adoption by women weavers in certain areas has spread (see chapter 4 below.)

The handlooms of European design being used in small numbers throughout Nigeria are locally-produced copies of simple looms introduced as part of the colonial government's efforts to "modernise" the weaving industry in the 1940s and 50s (page 192 below.) At present they are mainly used to produce copies of *aşo òkè* and other local cloths.

### **Histories - the single-heddle loom:**

As will already be clear we should not expect to be able to locate or construct a separate, unified history of weaving technology in the Yorùbá region, nor ought we to seek to impose an artificial impression of unity on the existing diversity. Nevertheless using a mixture of archaeological sources, a sprinkling of linguistic analysis, written records of Arab and European travelers, local oral (and in some Islamicized areas written) histories, and the few extant early samples in museum collections Lamb (1975:73-103, Lamb & Holmes 1980:15-23), Kriger (1990,1993), Johnson (1973), Perani

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(1977,1988,1992), O'Hear (1984,1988,1990), and Boser-Sarivaxevanis (1972, 1975, 1983), have all made contributions towards preliminary histories of pre-twentieth century textile production in Nigeria, aspects of which were assessed in Picton (1992). It is clear that we are confronted with an area of overlap between two broad traditions of weaving technology of distinct geographical origin. Unfortunately, although the evidence suggests the use of both types of loom by at least some Yorùbá for at least several hundred years, precise evidence of dates and geographical origins remain to be discovered. Nor can maps of their relative distributions in the 1970s (Lamb and Holmes 1980:17 & 175) be of much use in determining their areas of use either before or since.

Considering the single-heddle loom first, Boser-Sarivaxevanis (1975:323) asserts "Il ne fait pas l'ombre d'un doute que ce metier est un instrument Yorùbá qui au cours des temps ete transmis a divers peuples du Nigeria et aussi du Dahomey et du Togo." However her suggestion that the loom has a semitic Near-eastern source and was introduced to Nigeria by "proto-Yorùbá" immigrants from the northeast in the tenth century is wholly speculative. Robin Law (1973, 1976) argues that the myths of Yorùbá culture heroes arriving from the northeast are of C19th Islamic origin and have little historic foundation. An alternative, equally speculative, theory suggests that the diversity of single-heddle loom variations in use along the Nigeria-Cameroon border could indicate that this region was the site for a local invention of the technique. Picton (1992:19) raises the possibility of a correspondence between paths of distribution of both upright and horizontal single-heddle looms through Central and Southern Africa with the "Early Iron Age Industrial Complex" and the two streams of Bantu language distribution.

The only archaeological discoveries of any antiquity, at Benin and Igbo Ukwu, may be taken to fit in with the view that the single-heddle loom is, if

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not a local invention, at least of considerable antiquity in the lower Niger basin region (Kriger 1990:38). Fragments of bast (or raffia) fibre plain weaves dated to the ninth century have been recovered at Igbo-Ukwu, while more complex cotton and raffia textiles from Benin were dated to the late C13th/early C14th. By the C16th and C17th European traders were purchasing large quantities of cloth in Ìjèbù and Benin for resale in the Gold Coast, Gabon, Angola, and Brazil. Although no surviving examples of cloth from this trade have been located it would appear from contemporary accounts that they were the product of the single heddle vertical loom. "Dutch merchants - and presumably their suppliers also - recognized two main varieties of cloth. One kind... consisted of four strips sewn together to make a piece approximately three yards by two yards - it was dyed either a plain indigo blue, or in blue and white stripes... The other type of cloth, was made up of only three strips" (Ryder 1969:94). Landolphe's 1778 account describes the three strip cloth as "broad" and about 8 feet long (Ryder 1969:206) and notes that both types were woven by women on upright looms. A cloth similar in style to the heavily decorated Ìjèbù cloths known as *aşo olónà*, held in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, is thought to date from the 1790s (Aronson 1992:57). Several plainer cloths woven in cotton, raffia and cotton, and silk and cotton, on the single-heddle loom are among those collected to the north in Eggon in 1841, most of which are now in the British Museum. Eggon was an important market site on the borders of the Yorùbá and Nupe-speaking areas in the southwestern corner of the then expanding Sokoto Caliphate.

By the time of the Baptist missionary William Clarke's travels in the mid C19th both types of loom were in use in at least some areas. He noted that men wove side-by-side in sheds while women worked singly indoors. Weaving required "almost an incessant use of the hand in order to arrange the thread and give pattern to the piece" (1972:272). At this time the largest scale production



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he observed was in Ilá, with traders flocking from Ìjèsà, Ìlọ́rín, Yorùbá (ie. Ọ̀yọ́), and Abẹ̀òkúta to buy cloths at the four-day market which they could resell at 75-100% profit (ibid:152).



Figure 4: A depiction of a Yorùbá woman weaving on the single-heddle loom forming the support for a bowl used by an *ifá* diviner. Collected by Leo Frobenius in 1912, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz Museum für Völkerkunde IIC 27089

Kriger's recent research (1994) confirms that single-heddle weaving was a well-established and large scale industry among the northeastern Yorùbá-speaking kingdoms, competing with narrow-strip cloth for markets within the Sokoto Caliphate. The rapid decline of the single-heddle loom seems to have occurred only quite recently, extending to towns such as Ọ̀wọ́ where its output retains ritual significance (Poyner 1980:47). Murray, writing in 1936, found "half-a-dozen or more" looms in every compound in the Igbómìnà town of Omù-àrán, while as late as 1973 Poyner (op.cit.) claims that it was assumed that every Ọ̀wọ́ woman was able to weave. While Lamb and Holmes (1980:196) found large numbers of women weavers in the Pákàtá district of Ìlọ́rín in the mid-1970s, on my visit two decades later I could find

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only looms that had clearly not been used for many years. Small numbers of single-heddle looms remain in use by Yorùbá women in Ìjèbu-òde, the Bùnú area, and possibly also Òwò, while elsewhere a few Èbìrà women migrants may be found weaving on their version of the equipment. Elisha Renne (1992a) argues that there was no single factor that accounts for the decline in cloth production by women in the northeastern Yorùbá-speaking region. Accounts which seek to contrast the continued survival of narrow-strip cloth as a prestige product with the displacement of cheaper everyday wear by imports are overly simplistic. Rather she points to a variety of factors which include the expansion of education for girls, alternative income-generating opportunities for local women as improved transport facilities opened up new trading prospects, the disruption of a major market by the civil war, and the increasing difficulty of obtaining hand-spun thread.

### **Histories - the double-heddle loom:**

Moving on to consider double-heddle looms, a large number of textile fragments dated to as early as the C11th have been recovered from caves used as burial sites by the Tellem, along the Bandiagara cliffs in Mali. Although no loom parts have been found, the narrow strip format, along with the repetition of threading errors indicating the use of some kind of heddle, and the even width indicating the use of a reed, lead Rita Bolland to conclude that “it is quite possible that this loom strongly resembled the narrow-strip loom that is still used by male weavers in West Africa” (1992:77.) These sites are over 1200 km northeast of the Yorùbá area, but this evidence is at least consistent with the hypothesis that the double-heddle loom reached the Yorùbá from the north. Kriger (1990:39) states that whatever its ultimate origin “it can be said that its distribution owes much to the spread of Islam by way of traders and Qur’ānic scholars, for whom weaving, tailoring, and embroidery were



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respectable occupations.....For the lower Niger savanna area, our evidence is indirect. On the basis of the association with Islam, the treadle loom was probably being used in the Hausa state of Kano, for example, before the C15th, and in the Nupe and Oyo states by at least the C17th.” Law (1977) is cited in support of the *Ọ̀yọ́* dating.

It must however be noted that the evidence on which this dating is based is remarkably thin. Although there are ethnographic accounts of a direct transmission of weaving skills by Islamic scholars elsewhere in West Africa (Johnson 1977:176 cites Ferguson's unpublished field notes on the Dagomba of northern Ghana) no such practice has been documented among Yorùbá. The key reference cited directly or indirectly in all the above sources is a comment by Jennifer Bray “it is thought that weaving in Iseyin received a considerable impetus during the first two decades of the C19th, when refugees fled to the town from settlements destroyed by Ilorin raiders. Iseyin was under the protection of the Alafin of Oyo during the Oyo-Ilorin wars. Many of the Moslem refugees were weavers and they taught local people their traditional techniques, often in association with the spread of Islam. Converted farmers learnt sufficient Arabic to read the Koran and were at the same time apprenticed to a weaver.” Bray listed six quarters in *Ìsẹ̀yìn* in which 85% of full-time weavers were concentrated in the mid-1960s (Bray 1969a:192). Of these, two are areas which Gbadamosi (1978:5) noted as quarters where the early Muslim residents had been concentrated. Bray's remarks however are clearly applied to the early C19th and must be of extremely limited value as a source for the transmission of weaving techniques two centuries or more earlier.

There is clearly a strong connection between double-heddle weaving and the practice of Islam among the Yorùbá, but it is too simplistic to regard the link as a direct one to one correlation implying that loom technology and

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conversion to the Islamic faith arrived at the same time, and that the limited evidence for the dating of the latter may be used to also date the former. A case can certainly be made for suggesting that double-heddle weaving was established among the Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá rather earlier than the C17th, while conversion of the Yorùbá to Islam on a significant scale appears not to have occurred until the early C18th (Adelowo 1978, Gbadamosi 1978). Islam and double-heddle weaving are two among many aspects of Yorùbá culture as we know it from C20th accounts to which a northern connection has probably contributed. It is noticeable that others, including the masquerade tradition known as *egúngún*, the thunder deity Ẹ̀ṣàngó (Babayemi 1991:73), the *dùndún* tension drum, and the use of cavalry in warfare are also associated primarily with the Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá. The rise to power of Ọ̀yọ́ as a cavalry state stems from trade links and tactical changes established in the period of exile among the people of Borgu following the sack of Ọ̀yọ́-ilé by the Nupe early in the C16th (Law 1977:37-43). If the Ọ̀yọ́ obtained access to large numbers of horses through contacts with northern traders, probably including Songhai Wangara traders living among the Borgu (Lovejoy 1978), it would certainly have been possible to have learnt the technology of double-heddle weaving from them also. Recent research has indicated extensive linguistic borrowing from the Songhai language (Reichmuth 1988), although unfortunately the author did not consider a comparison of textile terminology (Reichmuth pers. comment 1994, See also Farias 1993:127). Circumstantial evidence for the presence of men's weaving at this period is provided by the origin myths of two Yorùbá communities. The western Yorùbá kingdom of Kétu is now thought to have been founded by a group of Ọ̀yọ́ migrants in the time of exile following the Nupe sack of Ọ̀yọ́-ilé (Adediran 1994:88). The origin myth of the town of Kétu records that a hunchbacked weaver was sacrificed at the gates (Parrinder 1956:18), while the senior Abẹ̀òkúta king, the Aláké of Aké, is believed to

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have traveled with the party to Kétu, where he learnt to weave (Ajisafe 1916:10).

While there is reason to suggest that the Yorùbá were in contact with Muslims by the C16th, including Samuel Johnson's account of account of an appeal for clemency made to the Aláàfin by a Nupe cleric (Johnson 1921:164), only small Islamic communities developed prior to the fall of Òyó-ilé in the 1830s. Non-Muslim double-heddle loom weavers are known from elsewhere in West Africa, including the Asante and Ewe of Ghana, and numerous small groups in the "middle-belt" of Nigeria. A report that indicates that weaving predated conversion to Islam for at least some Yorùbá is provided by Adelowo's research into the C19th conversion history of the Òyó region:

"The introduction of Islam into Igbeti was said to be due to the efforts of one Sanni Olajide. He settled at the court of Onigbeti (later Imam's quarter). He was an ubiquitous trader who carried his trade to Ilorin. He dealt in traditional cloths (aṣọ òkè) and he eventually arrived at Igbeti where there were many weavers of traditional cloths. Alongside his trade, he propagated Islam and it was from among the weavers of traditional cloths that the first set of converts came" (Adelowo 1978:57).

It would appear then that weaving was probably well established before significant Islamic conversion occurred, with the documented links between participation in long-distance trade networks and the adoption of a Muslim identity providing a likely motivation for the subsequent large scale conversion of weavers to Islam. Like other Muslims, some of the converted weavers would subsequently have established small Qur'ānic schools, producing the combination of weaving apprenticeship and Qur'ānic schools Bray's informants recalled.

The two narrow-strip robes in the Weickmann collection made in the mid-C17th have been much discussed but add little to the state of our

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knowledge of early Yorùbá weaving since their ultimate provenance is uncertain. The robes collected in “Haarder” ie. Allada, in the present Republic of Benin, are of weft-faced plain weave decorated in one case with tie-dyed patterns, and in the other with weft stripes (see photos in Jones 1994:33). While it is known that much of the cloth used in Allada was obtained from the nearby Yorùbá , it is intriguing to speculate whether Yorùbá weaving could have been weft-faced at this period. Unfortunately we still know too little about the history of design change in West African textiles to answer this question<sup>4</sup>.

In the C18th and early C19th Ọ̀yọ́-ilé was the capital of a large and expansionary empire (Law 1977), controlling key trade routes. Clapperton, the first European to visit the city in 1825-6, commented on the extent and diversity of its manufactures and trade, reporting that “a considerable quantity of cloth is made, and bartered with the people of the coast” (1829:57). Slightly earlier evidence for this trade is provided by two accounts from ship’s captains in the late C18th. Norris, a slave trader who visited Dahomey, observed that at the notorious annual festival the king gave to the governors of his forts gifts including “a large cotton cloth manufactured in the Eyo country, of excellent workmanship” (1789:87). In the market he found “a great many fine cotton cloths manufactured in the Eyo country” (ibid:125) while noting that the Eyos “cultivate cotton and a species of grass, and manufacture both into clothing for the use of the natives” (ibid:127). A second slaver, Adams, who visited the coast on several voyages between 1786 and 1800 (Law 1992:66), wrote that “the cloth manufactured in Hio is superior, both for variety of pattern, color, and dimensions, to any made in the neighbouring states” (Adams 1823:93).

The sack of Ọ̀yọ́-ilé in the Fulani jihad of the 1830s led to the dispersal of this weaving community as part of the general southerly movement of the Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá, with large numbers of weavers moving in

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particular to Ìlṣṣrìn and Ìsṣ́yìn, as well as the re-established town of Òyó. Some fled to Ìjàiyè, one of the two rival war camps established by Òyó refugees, then moved on to take refuge in Abẹ̀òkúta when Ìjàiyè in turn was destroyed by Ìbàdàn in 1862 (Murray & Hunt Cook 1938) - many of the weavers in Abẹ̀òkúta today are still concentrated in the Ìjàiyè quarter. Yorùbá weavers in the Fulani-ruled city of Ìlṣṣrìn were able to supply both the more southerly Yorùbá markets and to compete with the Nupe for trade within the Sokoto Caliphate. A contemporary account records that over 150 weavers were seen at work in the course of less than an hours ride through the town (Campbell 1861:86). Captured Yorùbá weavers were also kept as slaves and incorporated into a guild system alongside Nupe weavers and embroiderers at Bida (Perani 1992:103).

The C19th interaction between Yorùbá weavers and their northern neighbours was complex and multidirectional, making any attempt to reconstruct earlier relationships problematic. Among the Borgu (also known as Bariba) to the northwest, until the mid-C20th all the weavers were “Gando”, descendants of slaves of mostly Yorùbá and Sábé (Yorùbá speakers from a kingdom in the present Republic of Benin) origin (Lombard 1957:28). At least during the rule of the Sokoto Caliphate production of prestige robes involved a “complex system of inter-regional exchange” linking together processors of raw materials, “weavers, dyers, cloth-beaters, embroiderers, traders, and aristocratic and royal patrons” (Perani 1992:98), involving Fulani, Hausa, Nupe, as well as Yorùbá. Embroidered gowns were an important factor in the Fulani tradition of institutionalized gift giving. In the Hausa region weavers of the three main prestige cloths were Nupe migrants (ibid) but robes from Ìlṣṣrìn (Staudinger 1889:716), and probably also Òyó, were imported. We have already noted the movement of captured Yorùbá weavers to Bida, the new Nupe capital, in the mid C19th. According to Nadel (1942:279) it was this

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importation of Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá craftsmen, along with others from the Yàgbà (itself a northeastern Yorùbá region at least partly Ọ̀yọ́ populated) town of Salu, that lead to the reorganization of the previously free profession into a three guild structure. Of the three, the Yorùbá originated was second in size and “has representatives also outside Bida, in a number of Nupe villages” (ibid).

The spread of male weavers to other areas in the course of the C19th seems to have accompanied a growing demand for the prestigious clothing that portrayed an Islamic identity. Some idea of the dating of this process may be drawn from William Clarke’s observation in 1854 that while *sòkòtò* (trousers) and robes were worn in Ọ̀yọ́, the waist cloth and wrapper were still customary in neighbouring Iléṣà (1972:137). He describes the robe and trousers prevalent in Ọ̀yọ́ as “emphatically the Mohammedan dress and seldom found among the heathen population” (ibid:243). Many weavers were established in the newly-formed Ègbá capital at Abẹ̀òkúta by at least 1849 (Journal of Rev. David Hinderer 24/9/1849 CMS CA2 049/95) but there were probably some Ègbá weavers far earlier, as the reference to weaving in the founding myth of Aké suggests. In the journals recorded by CMS missionaries in various other locations they reported preaching to groups of weavers gathered at their sheds (eg. Journal of Rev. W.S.Allen 7 July 1868, Ìbàdàn. CA2 019/8). Weaving lineages in most of the major Yorùbá towns today trace back their origins to Ọ̀yọ́-ilé (Rom Kalilu 1992:110), either directly or through later moves via Ìlọ́rín or Ìsẹ̀yìn. Poyner reports that *aṣọ òkè* is called Ìlọ́rín cloth in Ọ̀wọ́ (1980:47), while Lamb (Lamb and Holmes 1980:25) describes migrations from Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ọ̀yọ́ to Ifẹ̀ and Ìbàdàn, and from Ìlọ́rín to Ìjẹ̀bu-Òde. An Ìsẹ̀yìn weaver is credited with having brought Islam to Oṇdó in the 1880s (Olupona 1991:156). Double-heddle loom weaving continued to spread southwards and eastwards from the Ọ̀yọ́ region throughout the C20th with small numbers of

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weavers noted in towns such as Adó (ten weavers, all Ọyọ migrants - Lloyd 1953:31), and more recently Ilẹ̀sà. In the 1990s there are small numbers of weavers supplying mostly local demand in virtually every Yorùbá town of any size, but the major weaving communities remain within Ọyọ Yorùbá towns, notably Ilorin, Ìsẹ̀yìn, Ọyọ, Ìbàdàn, Šakí, and Òkè-ìhò.

### **A history of weaving technology ?**

If we look at the actual equipment used for weaving, at the Yorùbá version of the double-heddle loom, it is apparent that there are both similarities with and differences from the looms used in other areas of West Africa. The similarities include such major aspects of the technology package as the use of a weighted drag sled to tension the warp and the narrow web of the finished cloth (with one or two exceptions) as well as the overall similarity of most looms. The differences are mostly minor - the shape of loom parts such as the beater and shuttle (see Lamb 1975:55-57), sitting position of the weaver, types of pulley and of foot-pedal etc. But while it is clear that we are dealing with a single technology package, whatever its ultimate origin, it is also clear that there have been separate local histories of technological change. We can suggest that this was mostly incremental change, with relatively few major innovations (such as the use of an extra set of heddles by Asante and Ewe weavers). Unfortunately there is no documented account of changes in weaving technology, whether incremental or innovatory, within any of the local traditions that have evolved, or of interaction between them, so we have no data to support any hypothesis. The impact of the influx of imported narrow strip cloth on Yorùbá weaving in the last few years, to be discussed below, is the first record of such a process that I am aware of. Scholarly treatment of the issue of weaving technology in other regions of West Africa has instead focused on resistance to change, raising questions about and seeking to explain

## Chapter Two - Historical Background

the perceived stability of the local technology package over a long period<sup>5</sup>. Although a detailed survey of looms in use among the Yorùbá would reveal that there has been a certain amount of technological innovation of restricted distribution<sup>6</sup>, this has been confined to peripheral aspects of the loom, such as the frame and pedals. A comparison of a photograph from the late C19th (Figure 3 above) with recent pictures in the following chapters will confirm that the essentials for weaving itself, the heddles, beater, shuttle, etc, remain much the same. Over the period for which we have some data, therefore, we appear to be faced with relative stability in weaving technology.

### **Aṣọ òkè design in historical perspective**

While, as we have seen, there has been little change in the essentials of weaving technology over the last one hundred years or so, the design of aṣọ òkè has evolved rapidly over the same period. Plotting the course of that evolution through the direct object of our enquiry, namely the cloth itself, requires the study of museum textile collections, augmented by reference to the occasional contemporary report and datable photographs and local cloth holdings. Since most museum collections are extremely haphazard and poorly documented it is easy to become pessimistic about the prospects of successfully completing the process. In fact it can never be complete as each new cloth located adds something to our knowledge of the past, but nevertheless it is possible to grasp at least the broad outlines, while at certain points we have enough to see more clearly.

Museum and other collections of course represent only a tiny fraction of the total range of aṣọ òkè designs, yet they still convey an impression of an almost unmanageable diversity. In Òyó alone William Bascom was able to collect 357 different designs in the course of a visit in 1950, while I collected over 300 designs from a single compound in 1995-96<sup>7</sup>. This impression would



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be reinforced by attending one of the three periodic wholesale cloth markets where many thousands of different designs are available<sup>8</sup>. However on closer examination it becomes apparent that the vast majority of designs are produced using only a limited set of decorative techniques and weave structures, in combination with a gradual expansion in the range of materials available. It is by concentrating on this repertoire of decorative techniques that we can begin to draw out from the diversity of individual designs the broad outlines of design change over time. We will distinguish for the purposes of analysis between innovatory change, which will be applied to additions to the set of decorative techniques or materials used, and incremental change which we will apply to the exploration of the possibilities offered by the then existing design package<sup>9</sup>. It will be primarily the elements of innovatory change which we will be able to identify here. Later when we look at aspects of the organization of cloth production, marketing, and consumption we will observe the processes of incremental change at work.

The baseline from which we can consider subsequent developments in aṣọ òkè design is provided by the group of textiles collected in the town of Eggan in the course of the British 1841 Niger Expedition, now in the British Museum. The background to the collection and technical aspects of the cloths have been extensively discussed by both Marion Johnson (1973) and Colleen Kriger (1990) so we need not dwell on them at length here. Eggan was an important weaving centre and a major market handling both riverine trade and cross-country traffic between the Yorùbá-speaking regions to the south, and the Nupe and more distant areas of the Sokoto Caliphate to the north. Although the collection comprises only twenty-eight cloths and garments, it was made as part of a deliberate attempt to research local cotton growing and textile production, so it is I think reasonable to assume that it was at least intended to be comprehensive. It includes cloths woven on both the single-heddle and the

## Chapter Two - Historical Background

double-heddle loom types, from Eggan itself and imports from elsewhere in the region including Bùnú, Seluk, Kakanda, Yàgbà, Kinami, Nikki, Ìlọrin, and Yorùbá (ie. Ọyọ́.) Kriger (ibid) ranks the cloths in terms of price per unit and concludes that in both loom types the cheaper cloths were imported from Ọyọ́ and Ìlọrin, while the more expensive cloths woven with silk were produced locally. Since we know from other sources that the Yorùbá also wove expensive silk cloths for both local use and export trade, it is clear that we are viewing only a part of a complex pattern of inter-regional trade.

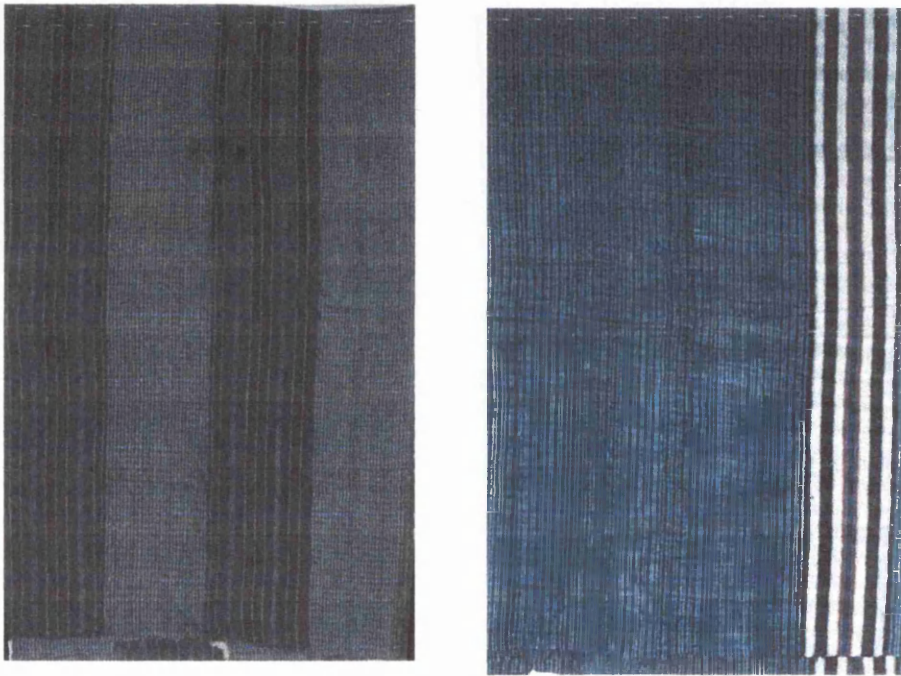


Figure 5: Narrow strip cloths of “Yoruba” origin collected in the town of Eggan in 1841. The earliest securely provenanced narrow strip cloths from the area, they utilize only warp and weft stripes in the design. British Museum, London (BM43 3-11-43, BM43 3-11-39)

Three of the cloths are double-heddle narrow-strip cloths identified as coming from Yorùbá. Two other cloths from Ìlọrin have been assigned by

## Chapter Two - Historical Background

Kruger to the double-heddle loom on the basis that the regularity of warp spacing indicates the use of a reed, but the width of the strips is comparable with some of the single heddle cloths at 29 cms. Leaving aside these two questionable cases, the widths of the strips in the whole set of 8 double-heddle cloths falls into two groups - five, including one of the Yorùbá cloths, have widths between 4.75 and 7.5 cms, while the other two Yorùbá cloths have widths of 13 and 14 cms. The three Yorùbá cloths and the two from Ìlṣorin share the same restrictive set of decorative techniques with the other double-heddle cloths, utilizing just warp and weft striping

### **The repertoire of techniques: warp and weft stripes**

All of the Yorùbá *aṣọ òkè* of which I am aware falls in a range between balanced and warp-faced plain weave. Warp-striping is easily achieved on a warp-faced or warp- predominant cloth by laying out groups of the desired colours when preparing the warp. This was and remains the most frequently used decorative technique on *aṣọ òkè*. Before the process of actually laying out the warp can begin it is necessary to establish the count of the various coloured threads required. If the master weaver<sup>10</sup> wishes to produce a new design he will simply estimate the appropriate numbers, often after a discussion with one of the older weavers. However if the aim is to copy an existing sample, as is frequently the case, an exact count will be made, usually by one of the more senior of the trainees or dependent weavers. One way of doing this count today is to take a pair of sharp scissors and carefully cut across the loose warp threads at the end of the sample, catching the trimmed threads on a sheet of paper. They can then be sorted easily into colours with the tip of a pencil and counted. Once counted the number of each colour thread in the warp will be written down on a scrap of paper, or chalked on the wall. For example for pattern P030 (see pattern list, Appendix A) the weaver had

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listed: “Yara 6, Aide 4, Aliga 4, Topola 4, Dudu 2, Bulu 2, Saini 20, Fusa 68”, (ie. yellow, pale blue, green, red, black, blue, lurex, fuchsia) a total of 110 threads, for which the cotton was two-ply, the lurex (in this case silver) single. This was the usual number of threads spread for a four inch wide warp in Èkejó compound, one of the largest in Òyó, although there was some occasional slight variation<sup>11</sup>.

Once it is decided to start weaving, the person who will weave the cloth has first to arrange the various colours in the desired order to produce the warp stripes. This requires considerable concentration and is not done by the younger trainees who often lay out the warps. The weaver takes the warp bundle and sits with it either beside another weaver who has already prepared the same design, or the person who made the thread count from the sample. He untwists the end loop holding all the colours, then hooks each group of warps of a single colour around a finger of his left hand. The other weaver will tell him the thread order needed as he goes on, eg “*fusa méfà (6), shine shine méjì (2), green méjò (8)*”. Each individual loop of thread is then transferred in order to the middle finger of the right hand until the whole warp has been rearranged in the correct order. This order is preserved by again twisting the entire loop around<sup>12</sup>. The warp will then be tied in to the loom and weaving commenced (page 112 below.)

Since most *aşo òkè* is not totally warp-faced it is also possible to produce muted weft-stripes by altering the colours used in the weft. The weaver prepares two shuttles with the desired colours and simply alternates between them as required. Usually the thread connecting the stripes of the same colour will be left to run along the selvedge of the cloth, although it may be cut if the stripes are widely separated. It is very unusual for more than two weft colours to be used in *aşo òkè* weaving. If weft stripes are placed close

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together in combination with the use of warp stripes this will produce checks or plaids.

While we do not have comprehensive surveys of the range of patterns produced using these techniques in the C19th, they remain the only decorative techniques utilized in the few other C19th textiles I have been able to locate. These include a cap and two pairs of trousers collected in Abẹ̀òkúta before 1868 by the CMS missionary Rev. Henry Townsend (in the Royal Exeter Museum), and four cloths and 16 strip samples collected, also in Abẹ̀òkúta, around 1900 (Bankfield Museum, Halifax. See photo below). For all of these the width of the cloth strips is around four inches.



Figure 6: Three of the strip samples collected in Abẹ̀òkúta around 1900. Bankfield Museum, Halifax.

Weavers refer to designs that incorporate weft stripes as *ọlọkọ méjì*, i.e. with two shuttles (literally “two boats”.) There is no name for warp stripes as such but there is (or rather was) an extensive repertoire of mostly descriptive terminology for naming specific designs that included warp stripes (page 152 below).

### Supplementary weft float

Once we begin to consider C20th cloths a further four major techniques come into play: supplementary weft float; ikat; openwork; and the use of the extra wefts in openwork to create pattern effects. Supplementary weft float is

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the creation of designs on one or both faces of the cloth using additional weft threads that float over the ground weave. The floats may appear on one or on both faces of the cloth. Rayon or viscose “silk” is normally used today, although occasionally one sees cotton or lurex. We will consider the single faced version first as this is by far the more common among Yorùbá weavers. At intervals of roughly one centimetre across the cloth strip the weaver will pick up one or sometimes two warps, tying around them a loose loop of string to make an extra heddle down the warp near the warp beam. At least until the 1960s these strings were attached to a short stick rested on top of the warp thread<sup>13</sup> but this is no longer used. The extra heddle (stick or strings) is pulled up by hand and a flat rectangular section of smoothed wood (the *apàsà*) slid under the raised threads. By turning the *apàsà* on its side it can be left in position behind the heddles while the supplementary weft is inserted by hand across the desired width of the warp. No shuttle is used, the weaver simply unravels thread from a little bundle, in whatever colours are needed.

Each pass of the supplementary weft is held in place by two picks of plain weave, for which the *apàsà* is turned flat and slid back towards the warp beam. It can be left there while the weaver does long sections of plain weave between the design areas or left hanging by a string from the front post of the loom. The supplementary weft is usually only worked across the design area, unlike in some weaving traditions in Africa where it may be woven in with the plain weave and concealed by the warp between designs.

Occasionally a modified technique may be used where a design will be apparent on both faces of the cloth. This is usually on designs, or parts of designs, where there are a number of distinct blocks of weft float across the cloth. In this case instead of raising single warps, the string heddle and *apàsà* will be used to hold up blocks of the warp. If a more complex

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design covering various different sections of the warp is needed additional string heddles are used to separate each group of warps.

The antiquity of this technique on double-heddle cloth in West Africa is demonstrated by its use on some of the C11th Tellem textiles (Bolland 1992:57.) However its use by Yorùbá weavers on the double-heddle loom seems to date only to the end of the C19th and the early years of the C20th. The first securely provenanced cloths utilizing the technique are in the Beving collection which was accessioned by the British Museum in 1934. The collection data for one of these cloths (Af 1934 3.7 142) indicates that it was bought in Ìlq̄rin “some years before 1913” (see photo below.) The cloth alternates warp striped sections with strips containing widely spaced groups of magenta silk weft float patterns on a blue and white checked ground weave.



Figure 7: Detail of one of the earliest documented examples of supplementary weft float decoration on aṣq òkè, accessioned in 1934 but collected around 1913 in Ìlq̄rin. British Museum, London (Beving Collection Af 1934 3.7 142.)

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Three other similar cloths, with more extensive float patterning also including yellow and green designs, were bought by the museum as part of the Adams collection in 1900, but unfortunately lack a detailed provenance. Twentieth century accounts indicate that the technique was particularly associated with weaving in Ìlọrin: for example Kenneth Murray in notes dated 1940<sup>14</sup> reported that “Ìlorin cloths are enjoying great popularity at present. This is a fashion that has come in during the last 3 or 4 years. The cloths have patterns inlaid in them in cotton or silk and cost from 10 to 15 shillings each.” Although, as Anne O’Hear (1990:176) has pointed out, the paucity of early evidence makes it uncertain whether the technique was in use in Ìlọrin at earlier dates, it is clear that its use increased markedly in the 1930s and subsequently. Whether this was, as she suggests, part of a demand for brighter colours and new patterns associated with a shift in patronage away from a northern Islamic elite to the newly wealthy southerners, or merely, as Murray indicates, a shift in Lagos fashions<sup>15</sup>, it was only in response to this popularity that other Yorùbá weavers began to take up the technique. It is not found on any of the Ọ̀yọ́ cloths collected by Bascom in 1950, and was not mentioned in an article on Ìsẹ̀yìn weaving written at this time either<sup>16</sup> (Dodwell 1955). Ọ̀yọ́ weavers today confirm that they learnt the method from Ìlọrin <sup>17</sup>. The Yorùbá name given to supplementary weft float designs today is *ọ̀nà*, but an older term for the technique is *rẹ̀kẹ̀*. A cloth could be made wholly from strips decorated with float weave, or these could be alternated with plain or warp-striped strips. There is a relatively small repertoire of patterns, some of which are abstract arrangements of squares and triangles, while others are representations of objects such as combs and Qur’ānic writing boards<sup>18</sup>. Animal motifs were also woven occasionally (see Figure 27, page 138), of which the elephant was the most common. In addition to the mainstream of weft float designs a small number of distinct sub styles or passing fashions developed. The first of these



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was for a far more complex array of pattern shapes covering a larger proportion of the strip. The finest example of this I have seen is owned by an Òyó chief and was bought by his mother in the early 1930s (see Figure 8, following page), while others may be seen worn by several chiefs in contemporary photographs (eg. Daily Service newspaper 12/3/1945).

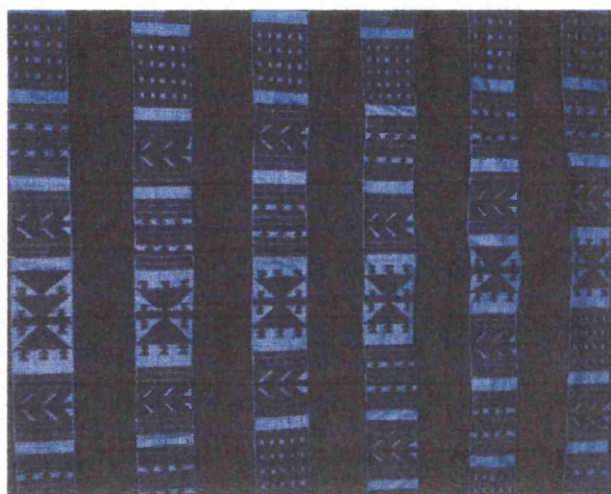


Figure 8: A form of unusually elaborate weft float decoration that was fashionable in the 1950s. Private collection, Òyó.

Using the weft floats to produce letters along the strip was also a popular novelty in the 1940s and 1950s. In his report on a visit to Òşogbo on 1st December 1945, one J.N. Oliphant, an adviser on rural development, wrote: “I saw one man strip weaving a lettered design using four supplementary heddles in addition to the two main ones” (NAI, Oshun Div 1/1/1006/1, page 10). Most of the designs I have seen have messages of good fortune relating to brides, indicating that they were used for engagements or weddings, but in the National Museum, Lagos there is a cloth woven with the name and title of the Governor General, together with the year, 1959. In the Newark Museum, New Jersey, there is a rather later example in the form of a large *agbádá* robe, which combines images of elephants with a proverb noting that rich men stick together ( Accession number 83.102). Occasionally one sees cloths where the float decoration is continuous along the whole strip. Usually this is in the form

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of stacked triangles, but in one idiosyncratic design white birds are outlined in float weave against a blue float weave background, completely concealing the beige ground weave (see Figure 65, page 394). As with all aspects of *aşo òkè* design, the tradition provides scope for individual formal exploration and experimentation. One documented example of such experimentation is provided by the work of the *Ìlọrin* weaver Yaya Olabintan, discussed by Anne O'Hear (1988, 1990). She notes that he was credited by *Ìlọrin* weavers with introducing the use of supplementary weft float weaving to the town, but that this cannot be the case since he was born around 1890 (1990:175). Nevertheless he does seem to have been the innovator of a style that combined



wider strips with extremely elaborate weft float patterning created using numerous extra leash and stick heddles. A number of these cloths were photographed by J.D.Clarke in the 1930s (Clarke 1938) and may be found in museum collections in the UK and Lagos.

Figure 9: An example of the innovatory use of complex double-sided supplementary weft float designs by the *Ìlọrin* weaver Alhaji Yaya Olabintan, Lagos Museum

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Although some considerably simplified versions of Olabintan's designs may be found on cloth bought in Ilorin in the 1970s and 80s in various private collections, which were probably woven either by apprentices or imitators, his family claimed to O'Hear that they had kept the secret of the technique. When I visited the compound in 1996 one of Olabintan's sons claimed to be able to reproduce the two samples he still owned, but he clearly had not done so for some time as none of the other men weaving there had seen the cloth before.

Attempting to establish a single source for the introduction of weft float weaving to Ilorin, as O'Hear does in her article (1990), is probably doomed to failure. No aspects of the designs or process are sufficiently distinctive that they may be compared with any assurance to similar features in another weaving area<sup>19</sup>. The most likely explanation is that they were part of a wider interplay of design features between the double-heddle and the single-heddle weaving traditions in the context of the wide distribution of textiles through multidirectional trading links. Within Nigeria the antiquity of the technique is more clearly established for the single heddle loom, being found on some of the C13th-14th Benin textile fragments (Connah 1975:236-7.) The only instance of the technique in the Egga collection is a rudimentary float design using both indigo dyed cotton and imported red wool, on a single-heddle cloth from "Seluk"<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 10: Detail of a single-heddle loom cloth in the 1841 Egga collection, attributed to Seluk, showing the limited use of a basic supplementary weft float design. BM Af 3-11-42.

Although the later replication of double-heddle loom designs, especially the configuration of narrow strips, on single-heddle loom cloths, is more obvious

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(see eg. photograph in Picton 1992:35), in areas where both technologies were in use side by side it would seem likely that they influenced each other.

The use of supplementary weft floats, as we have seen, spread to other weaving towns from Ilorin in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, and by the latter date was one of the characteristic features of most *aşo òkè*. It continued to be popular throughout the 1970s, but since then has not been fashionable. Nevertheless weavers still get occasional orders to weave variations on older designs, and some patterns that utilize the technique do enjoy fleeting popularity. Of the 315 designs woven in Èkẹjọ compound in Òyọ from June 1995 to June 1996 only 10 utilized weft floats, and observation elsewhere indicated the proportion for other weavers was similar. The weavers of Èdẹ and Òşogbo are the main users of the technique today. In addition to the mainstream *aşo òkè* business, in which they are rather marginal actors, they have developed a specialized trade producing ready-sewn robes and trousers which are bought at Èdẹ and Aráòmí markets by traders who resell them in northern Nigeria. Most of these are made from cloth which reproduces *aşo òkè* patterns from the 1960s and 1970s with a high proportion of weft-floats, often in pink or turquoise, on a white or beige ground weave<sup>21</sup>.

### **Warp ikat**

Ikat is a relatively unusual technique in West African weaving. On the single heddle loom it is or was found among some eastern Yorùbá women's weaving traditions, and in the neighbouring community of Igara (Boser-Sarivaxevanis 1983:32). On the double-heddle loom it is found among the Baule and Dyula of Côte D'Ivoire (ibid), and in a more simple form was used on some older Anlo Ewe cloths (Lamb 1975:173.) Since it is a relatively basic technique, and there are numerous traditions of indigo resist dyeing in West Africa, I don't think we need to assume a single origin for these, or to



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follow Lamb (1980:43) and hypothesize an external introduction. Yorùbá *aşo òkè* weavers, and the Èkìtì Yorùbá women weavers, both used ikat simply to alternate dyed and undyed sections on warp stripes. This was done by tying up a section of a prepared warp with raffia or cotton prior to dyeing. Alternatively sections of the warp were starched to resist the dye. No attempt was made to use the technique to create more complex or representational designs.

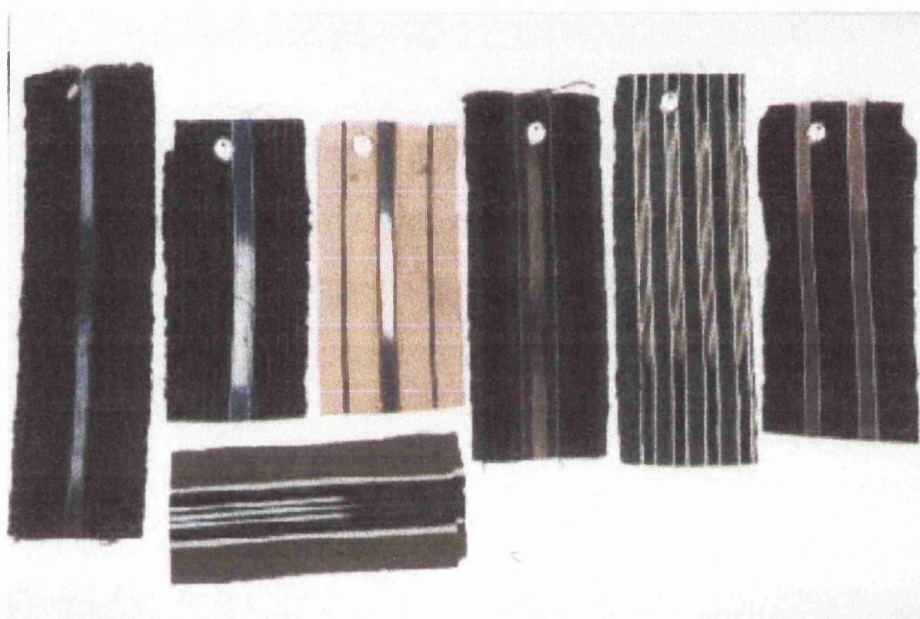


Figure 11: Samples of ikat designs from the Bascom collection, assembled in Òyó in 1951, now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Although it is tempting to assume that ikat dyeing is an ancient decorative technique associated with the long-established craft of women's indigo dyeing, there is no specific evidence that this is the case. There are plenty of other ancient indigo-dyeing centres where ikat is not found, for example in Kano. Ikat is utilized on a gown and trousers collected in Òyó in the mid 1930s, now in Bristol Museum<sup>22</sup>. *Alábe* is the Yorùbá term for ikat, recorded by Bascom in Igàná in 1938 and in Òyó in 1950 (Bascom and Boyer

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n.d.:89), while the term *wáàka* is also used sometimes, particularly in Ilorin (Lamb op.cit). With the decline of local dyeing in the late 1960s and 70s (see below), ikat has become very rarely used. When it is needed today the weaver himself will do the dyeing using a small bowl of commercial dye. Rather than tying or starching the warp it will simply be folded into a 8 to 12 inch length and one end immersed in the dye for a few moments. This crude method does not achieve the same subtlety of design of which professional dyers were capable.

### Openwork

Openwork, like supplementary weft-float, was a characteristic feature of *aşo òkè* in the 1960s and 70s. The first type, which for the purpose of distinction we will call true openwork, is created by using thick extra wefts to tie together groups of warps, producing a line of holes across the strip of cloth. The thick weft is made by spinning 8 ply cotton using a small spindle (*kèkè*) that is rolled between the palm of the hand and the thigh, then allowed to spin free. The resulting thread is cut into about 60 cm lengths. Using one piece of the thread for each hole required (usually 8 to 10) the weaver pulls forward a cluster of warps from the upper half of the shed and inserts the thread behind them, drawing it through until only a centimetre or so is left. He repeats this with each thick thread across the warp, then weaves two passes with the regular weft to hold it in place. He then passes each extra weft again right around its group of warps working from left to right using his left-hand forefinger and thumb, holding all the extra wefts together and drawing then tight to pull the encircled warps together, then adding two rows of regular weft, then using the right hand forefinger and thumb to wrap the warps again from right to left. This is repeated a number of times depending on the length of the holes required. When the row of holes is complete the weaver simply continues

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with the regular weft. The thick extra wefts can either be trimmed off with a razor blade, or floated down the surface of the strip to be used for the next row of holes. In the latter case they will be held tight between the roll of cloth on the cloth beam and the weaver's stomach, until needed.

The second type, which we can call false openwork, is made using a device like a very thick toothed metal comb. This is not, as some previous accounts have suggested, pushed into the strip of cloth. Rather it is placed on the unwoven warp and wefts are beaten in around it. This was only used on one design at Èkẹjọ compound during the survey period. It produces holes which tend to become smaller and less visible as the cloth is worn. Weavers give the name *ẹlẹya* to both forms of openwork, also calling it by the English term "button-hole".

Once again it would seem likely that the design repertoire of women single-heddle loom weavers is the ultimate source of this technique in *aşo òkè*, since it is documented on the fragments dated to the C13-14th excavated at Benin (Connah op.cit). Dr. Baikie, in his account of the Niger expedition of 1854 noted "We have seen a peculiar sort of country cloth, ornamented by perforations, which were done during the weaving, and which we were told was made by Igbo people" (1966:287-8). These cloths were on sale in markets near the Niger-Benue confluence, an area where cloths from a wide range of Nigeria weaving traditions were exchanged. Akinwumi (1990:302) illustrates an openwork cloth which he says was woven in *Ọyọ* in 1910.

If the extra weft threads used to create the holes are floated along the face of the cloth to the next row of holes rather than being cut off, they may be used to form an additional decorative technique, known to the weavers as *njáwù*. The face of the cloth with the carried over threads is worn outwards, with a textural effect created by the rows of threads running down over the surface of the strips. In some cases the holes are made so small as to be hardly

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visible, making it clear that the threads are the main effect intended. The carried over threads may also be used for creating holes in different alignments on each row, creating zigzag or crossover effects. While the technique of openwork was probably drawn from outside the *aṣọ òkè* tradition, it is the weavers of *aṣọ òkè* who have elaborated it into a major design feature and developed a unique style of ornamentation using the extra weft threads in this way.

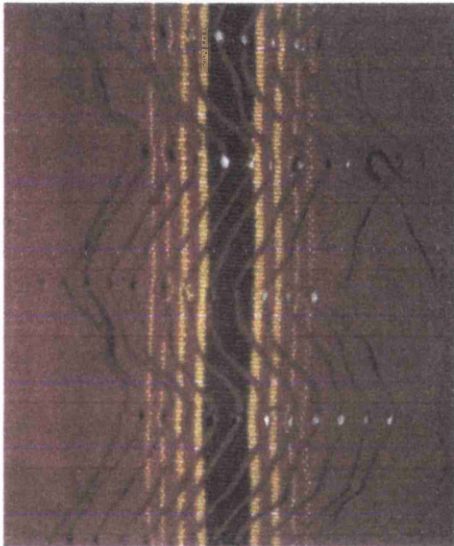


Figure 12: Detail of a cloth strip on which a decorative effect is achieved by floating the extra wefts used to create openwork in a zig-zag pattern down the strip.

Author's collection.

### **Materials: hand-spun cotton**

In conjunction with the exploration of the design possibilities opened up by the set of techniques described, Yorùbá weavers have exploited the greater access to a wider range of materials throughout the C20th. At the start of the twentieth century and through the early decades *aṣọ òkè* was predominantly woven of local hand-spun cotton. Imported cotton was available in a limited range of colours but was primarily used by tailors rather than weavers. The expatriate firms that dominated Nigeria's external trade were concerned to import finished cloth and to export raw cotton, rather than to import cotton for the local weaving industry (see graph in Johnson



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1976:114.) However throughout the country the relative lack of success of the efforts to establish large-scale cotton exports was attributed by the British Cotton Growing Association to competition for the crop from local weavers who were usually prepared to pay higher prices (Shea 1980:96).

The process of spinning cotton has been described many times and there is no need to repeat it here (eg Picton & Mack 1989:30-32). More significant is the social organization of spinning and the relation between spinners and weavers. Spinning was carried out by women, and the prepared thread was purchased from the spinners by the weavers. Most cotton grown locally was a short staple type known as *Ishan* (*Gossypium vitifolium*), although numerous attempts were made by the colonial authorities to introduce other strains. Hand spun thread, known as *òwú kókun* or *òwú ríran*, was available in varying thicknesses. Good quality tightly spun thread was called simply “real thread”, *òwú gidi*, while coarser thread was called *fúù* (Bascom & Boyer n.d.:51). A beige strain of local cotton, called *ẹlẹ̀pọ̀nkun* (probably *Gossypium purpurascens*, Bascom & Boyer n.d.:65) was also sometimes used, producing a thread similar in colour to wild silk.

### **Silk: local and imported**

In addition to hand-spun cotton weavers made use of a local wild silk and of magenta imported silk. The wild silk, *sányán*, used by Yorùbá weavers was mainly spun from the cover of the nests of the moth *Anaphe infracta*, although similar thread produced from three other species was imported from northern Nigeria<sup>23</sup>. The threads from the cover and mass of cocoons inside are degummed by boiling in an alkaline solution before spinning (Ene 1964). More important than the imports from the north was a local trade in silk from the regions where the moths were most prevalent to the main weaving centres.

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During the 1940s when there was a shortage of imported cotton due to import restrictions associated with the war, a dispute arose when Ìjèbu traders who were accustomed to bring silk from Ìjèbu-Igbó to sell in Ìsẹ̀yìn, found that they could no longer obtain hand-spun cotton in Ìsẹ̀yìn to take back to their home region<sup>24</sup>. Most wild silk came from the vicinity of Ifẹ̀, Ilẹ̀sà, and Oṅdó, where it was known as *sánmíyán*. Although most *sányán* is a light beige in colour, lighter white cocoons are also found which were spun separately to produce a white silk thread. The latter was usually more expensive (At Ìlọ́rin market in November 1950 it was priced at 4s.3d per lb, compared with 3s.4d for the brown<sup>25</sup>), and was mainly used for embroidery, although also for the white central stripes in the most expensive cloth. Since the beige colour of *sányán* was highly prized it was not usually dyed but Bascom's informant in 1951 did report using it for ikat (Bascom & Boyer n.d.:64).

The term *àlàárí* is used today to refer to cloths woven with magenta cotton or imitation silk thread and its origins in the import of European waste silk have been virtually forgotten. It was a trade that Marion Johnson noted went back at least to the early nineteenth century, involving the exportation of magenta waste silk yarn from France and Italy, to Tripoli, and from there via caravan across the Sahara to Kano (1976:100). In the year 1897 alone the British Consul in Tripoli estimated the value of this trade at £6,716 (ibid), while Barth's earlier estimate of annual trade in the 1850s was slightly lower at £5,600 (Johnson's calculation of his cowry figures.) Lamb (Lamb & Holmes 1980:40) suggests that the trade may be far older, linking it to early Arab exports of red cloth to the Niger bend. In the 1820s Clapperton noted Yorùbá traders purchasing *àlàárí* in the Nupe town of Kulfo (1967:160.) The trans-Saharan trade declined sharply with the completion of the railway from Lagos to Kano in 1912, and the original thread became increasingly hard to obtain, although small quantities continued to be imported via Lagos,

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apparently as recently as the 1970s (Lamb & Holmes op.cit). In the 1970s Shea (1980:99) noted that in the village of Katsinawa, near Kano, poor quality local wild silk (*tsamiya* in Hausa) was dyed in a solution made from a type of guinea corn to make an imitation *àlàárí* (Hausa: *alharini*). It is this type of imitation *àlàárí* that is remembered by most elderly Òyó weavers today, although one did mention that he thought it originally came from Arabia<sup>26</sup>.

### Indigenous Dyes

The high value placed on imported red cloth or thread has been noted from several other regions of Africa, and was clearly linked to the lack of a suitable fast red dye locally, although Yorùbá dyers, like their Hausa counterparts mentioned above, were capable of producing an imitation *àlàárí*. Dyeing of thread was a female craft among the Yorùbá, using clay pots set into the ground. This is often contrasted with the deep cement pits used by male Hausa dyers but Shea suggests that the latter were a mid-C19th development from the use of larger sunken clay pots (1975:155). At the time of Bray's research in Ìsẹ̀yìn in the mid-1960s it was still possible to document a complex network of interconnections between the dyers and the weaving compounds (1966:62 ff). Here we will be concerned with the colour range made available to weavers by local dyers<sup>27</sup>.

It has become a truism to assert that indigo blue was the predominant colour achieved by Yorùbá dyers, leading some scholars to ascribe to it an essentialised meaning in Yorùbá culture<sup>28</sup>. Depending on the number of times that the thread was dipped, and on the quality and strength of the dye solution used, a considerable range of colours could be achieved, from a light blue (*òfẹ̀fẹ̀*), medium blue (*àyínrín*), through to a very dark almost black (*dúdú*). There was a direct link between the intensity of the colour and the price charged for the finished cloth. An Òyó weaver in 1951 estimated that with

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fresh dye it would take only five minutes to produce light blue, half an hour for a medium shade, but one to two days for a dark indigo. A really intense black indigo could require yarn to be dyed, hung out to dry, then re-immersed in fresh dye seven or more times<sup>29</sup>. The Yorùbá word for indigo dye is *aró*, the process of dyeing is called *pá láró* or *páşò láró* (to dip cloth in dye), or *rẹ láró* or *rẹşò láró* (to soak cloth in dye), while the women dyers are *iyá aláró* (mother owner of dye), *odáró* (makers of indigo dye), or *arẹrọ* (those who soak with dye), while the generic term for indigo dyed cloth is *ópáró*<sup>30</sup> (literally, "it is dyed with indigo".)

Caustic soda, which speeded the process of dyeing, was introduced in Abẹ̀òkúta in 1924, and its use was widespread in the town's dominant *àdìrẹ* dyed-cloth industry by 1928, while synthetic indigo was first used in 1932 (Byfield 1993:177-178). It seems however to have only spread slowly to the main weaving towns - little use was made of either soda or imported dye in Òyọ in 1951, although by 1965 Bray found they were widespread in Ìsẹ̀yìn, used in combination with the local indigo (1966:67). Today the small amounts of indigo-dyed thread that are still needed are usually done with imported dye by the weavers themselves.

The other major dye colour produced for Yorùbá weavers was a shade of tan or beige that imitated the colour of *sányán*. Indeed in Ìsẹ̀yìn Bray found it was more widespread than indigo dyeing, with 50 percent of all weaving compounds having brown dye vats in operation, compared to 27 percent with indigo vats (1966:64 and 69). She describes the dyeing process as using a solution made from the bark of a tree she identifies as *idin*, in which the yarn is heated for 15 hours. She notes that the resulting dye was not fast (1966:62-3). Bascom's earlier data from Òyọ is different and rather more complex: tan cloth (*gbìnlerẹ*) was dyed with a solution prepared from bark of a tree known as *irà* (*Bridelia micrantha* or *B.ferruginea*), with the bark of *ìgbá* (*Parkia filicoidea* -

## Chapter Two - Historical Background

African locust bean), and the roots of *emi gbege* (tones unknown) (*Pseudocedrela Kotschy*). If darker shades were needed the husks of locust beans were added, along with roots of *idí* (*Terminalia spp.* - Bray's *idin* ?), and roots of *ayín* (*Anogeissus Schimper*). After the yarn had been boiled in the pot of dye solution for one hour it was taken to the riverbank and rubbed with mud before being washed (*gbínlerè* may be translated as “plant in mud”). A slightly different but overlapping list of ingredients may be found in a 1941 report<sup>31</sup>: roots of the *idí* and *ayín* trees, leaves of the “Eshin” tree (no tone marks given), bark of *ìrà*, pods from the *ìgbá*, together with “bits that fell off iron when it is heated and hammered” and kernel oil.

We have noted that dyers produced a magenta red shade in imitation of *àlàárí*, but the ingredients were already mostly forgotten when Bascom was gathering data. One weaver recalled that it used the stalks of Elephant grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*, Yorùbá name *èsún pupa*), with alum, while another suggested the leaves of Elephant Grass combined with fruit of *tàgûrì* (*Adenopus breviflorus*), fruit and bark of *bọ̀dọ̀nì* (*Acacia arabica*) with laundry starch and a further ingredient he could no longer recall (Bascom and Boyer n.d.:61). Bascom was unable to obtain any samples of either thread or cloth dyed red with local dyes in 1951. Other sources suggest a wide variety of other possible ingredients for red dye, notably Guinea Corn husks (Oke in Barbour & Simmonds ed. 1971:17), or types of Camwood or Barwood (Talbot 1926, volume 3:942, Caldwell 1952:343), although Bascom and Boyer (op.cit. p.62) cite Dalziel (1937:256-257), in noting that the latter are insoluble and therefore produce only a surface red on garments. Yellow dye was made from ginger (*atalè*) mixed with water and natron imported from the north. Combining yellow with shades of indigo gave a green but this was rarely used.

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### Imported Dyes and Yarn

The colour range available to *aşo òkè* weavers prior to the introduction of imported dyes was therefore white, a wide range of blues, beige, magenta, yellow, and occasionally green. In the 1940s and 50s the increasing use of both imported vat-dyed yarn and of imported dyes offered weavers the potential to expand the range of colours used. However contemporary reports suggest that they were initially slow to respond, and that their openness to new colours varied from area to area. With both the cotton yarn and the new dyes weavers were initially mainly interested in replicating the existing colours. Thus Bascom (ibid:65) found that in *Òyó* in 1951 only five imported dyes were used: beige (*sányán ti òyìnbó* i.e. whiteman's wild silk); black; yellow; green (*àlìgà*); and a red called *òyìnbó kò fẹ wàhálà* (i.e. whiteman does not like trouble<sup>32</sup>.) He noted that the weavers were conservative in their use of colour, with a wider use of green being the main innovation. A similar response was apparent at a demonstration of dyeing methods organized by the Department of Commerce and Industry for the weavers of *Ìlọrín* in July 1955. S. Levi, the dye chemist, listed the colours of imported cotton yarn available in the city as "bleached", black, maroon, dark green, khaki, royal blue, yellow or lemon, and bright azoic red, plus shades of indigo, then noted<sup>33</sup> that they "were interested to obtain the above mentioned shades and somewhat critical of any other shades or deviations from the standard." Although this apparent conservatism is surprising given the more familiar picture of *aşo òkè* weavers as open to novelty, it is still noticeable as late as the mid-1960s in Jennifer Bray's research from *Ìsẹyìn*. She recorded (1966:76) the colours in the patterns she observed, in order of frequency, as brown, black or deep blue, white, green, red.

There is some evidence to suggest that the range of colours woven varied from area to area. In notes made sometime in the 1930s Kenneth

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Murray<sup>34</sup> recorded: "There is much weaving done in the Yoruba towns from Oke-Iho westwards and south to Meko. At Igangan, Iwere, Iganna, and in the district round it is mainly white, or white with blue or natural coloured stripes. At Oke-Iho blue warps are more common while at Oyo and Igba Ora there is a big variety of colours."

For a long period local and imported cotton thread were both used, with the imports only gradually displacing the local. In 1946 a colonial official<sup>35</sup> noted "the vast majority of Iseyin cloth is made from a mixture of local and imported yarn. The warp is made either wholly of imported yarn or the background is of local yarn and the pattern imported yarn. the woof is nearly always of local yarn. There is a rough baft made entirely of local yarn and there is a finer quality baft woven from a finer yarn coming from the Ife area." We have seen that access to a wider colour range was not a major factor promoting a shift towards machine-spun cotton. More significant was the fact that the thread was smoother and could therefore be woven faster since it slid through the loom more easily and did not break so often. Other factors included the gradual decline in the availability of hand-spun cotton as girls and young women began to take advantage of alternative employment opportunities, and, in the 1950s and 60s, of the gradual widening of access to primary education. The relative price of the cotton was also an issue, influenced by fluctuations in world cotton prices, although this could be passed on to the purchasers of the cloth - in 1947 Wilkes<sup>36</sup> estimated the cost of a 9 ft. by 5 ft. 4 ins wrapper of "ordinary quality" made from local thread as £1.8.3d, while a similar cloth of imported yarn would cost over £2. By 1953 however, little local thread was still being used. Dodwell (1955:121) estimated that in Iseyin 81% of output was wholly of imported yarn, 16% was a mixture, but only 3% was woven of entirely local yarn. By 1965 Bray still found "sporadic" use of local cotton, although it had not been used in the previous

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month by 82% of weavers surveyed (1966:55). It was substantially cheaper than imported cotton (12 shillings per *igàn* compared with 22 shillings for imported). At that time almost all cotton used came from India but local thread mills in Lagos and Kano were just coming on stream (ibid:56.) Subsequently the import of thread was made illegal and the weavers became reliant for all their supplies on the often erratic<sup>37</sup> local factories. In the 1970s weavers began to work with other colours, notably pale blues, pink, and dark brown, gradually exploring the ever-increasing range of industrially-produced yarn that was now available. Machine spun cotton is bought in wrapped bundles of 24 knots (*eékún*) of thread, an amount known as an *igàn*. In the 1990s very little hand spun cotton is ever used. If a customer requires it, usually for a robe of *etù* or *sányán*, it can be obtained from elderly women, but this is extremely rare. Most weavers interviewed had not used any hand spun thread for many years. Two exceptions noted were a weaver from Ìsẹ̀yìn who offered imitation *sányán* strips for sale at Ará òmí market, and a weaver from Ìweré, who was selling bundles of plain white hand spun cloth<sup>38</sup> for use by traditional medicine specialists and in the making of hunters' shirts. The most recent development was the use of "mirai" or "cone", thread bought by the weavers on large cone-shaped spools intended for use in industrial textile production. Thicker and more lustrous than the regular cotton, but less so than rayon, it is used only for warp threads. Before it can be spread for the warp it must be transferred from the large spools onto the usual reels.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century small quantities of imported silk were used, in the manner of *àlàdí* for supplementary weft floats and narrow warp stripes. By the 1940s rayon was being imported as a cheaper substitute, although it attracted a high rate of duty<sup>39</sup>. In the 1950s Courtaulds regularly advertised rayon as suitable for local weaving in newspapers and magazines such as the Nigerian edition of *Drum*. In the 1990s artificial silk is



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produced in Nigeria, mostly by a company called Hafrayon, in Kano, with imports prohibited. Since the late 1980s weavers have been using rayon for the whole of the warp of some cloths, selling them at a significant premium to cotton cloth. Rayon “silk” is called *siliki* in Yorùbá. It is bought in packets of twenty knots (in this case the Yorùbá terms *ìgàn* and *eékún* seem not to be used.)

### Lurex

The use of metallised polyester fibre or lurex<sup>40</sup> was a major innovation which has subsequently transformed the appearance of *aşo òkè*. The introduction of lurex to Yorùbá weaving can be dated with some confidence to the mid-1970s. None is found on any cloths I have seen which can be securely dated to before the early 1970s. John Picton notes that there was none to be seen on his visit to Nigeria in 1971 but that it was well established by the time Lamb and Holmes were doing their research at the end of the decade (1992:43). Professor Folarin of OAU, Ifè, who was then researching colours used in Yorùbá crafts, remembers that it first appeared around 1975, but was widely established by the time people were buying cloth for the FESTAC in 1977<sup>41</sup>.

The impact made on Yorùbá *aşo òkè* weaving by the spread of lurex might at first seem surprising, since unlike many other regions of the world there is no well-established history of weaving or embroidery using earlier forms of metallic thread. There are however a few pointers that indicate a long-standing interest in the aesthetics of shinyness in dress. In the classic account of Òyó Yorùbá oral history Samuel Johnson recounts the story of an occasion when a late C17th-C18th *Aláàfin* of Òyó ordered a unique robe to literally outshine a visiting Popo king: “A simple gown was thereupon woven, of common stuff indeed, but embossed all over with the silken wool of the

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large cotton tree, seen at a distance the nature of the cloth could not be made out by the crowd when the sun shone upon it, it reflected a silken hue to the admiration of all.” (1921:179). There was one garment where metallic thread was used for clothing, namely the decoration of a type of men’s cap with brass or silver wire. Called *ónífilàdẹ*, they were made from velvet embroidered with elaborate patterns in either brass or silver. The velvet was sewn onto a canvas support, then the patterns which had been outlined on paper were tacked onto the velvet, then covered with the wire<sup>42</sup>. The cost of such a cap was high - up to 12 shillings in the 1940s if silver was used. An account from the nineteenth century reports that Başòrun Samoye of Abẹ̀òkúta (held title 1851-1868) wore a “gold-laced cap” (Stone 1900:188). In Lagos this type of cap is reported to have been restricted to the king until the 1840s (Bamgbose 1987:21). The fact that lurex is sometimes called *idẹ* (Yorùbá for brass) by weavers supports this possible linkage.

Then there is the question of whether cloth decorated with metallic thread was imported into the region from elsewhere. The huge variety of cloths from Europe, North Africa, and India, imported into West Africa by Portuguese, and later other European, merchants from the C16th onwards, has been well documented (eg. Vogt 1975.) There is no evidence of a regular trade in metal-decorated fabric but it would seem likely that it was among the more novel and heavily decorated cloths that would be shipped in smaller quantities for sale to chiefs and kings<sup>43</sup>. Amongst the list of cargo for the trans-Saharan trade to Kano recorded<sup>44</sup> by a French officer at Zinder in 1901 was “some silky stuff of showy colours with patterns printed or embroidered in gold, silver, or silk.” The description of the ceremonial dress of the Awùjalẹ̀ of Ìjẹ̀bu given in Paris by the nineteenth century slave Osifekunde noted “from his shoulders flow a mantle of gold brocade” (Curtin 1967:278).

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Whatever its antecedents, Yorùbá weavers began to utilize lurex in the weaving of *aṣọ òkè* in the mid-1970s. The most likely immediate source of its introduction was via Saudi Arabia. We have noted above the historical links between narrow-strip weaving among the Yorùbá and Islam. Virtually all the male master weavers<sup>45</sup> are Muslims and the performance of the Haj by both senior men and women is a regular feature of life in weaving compounds. Weavers on the Haj regularly bring back large quantities of Japanese lurex for their own use or for resale, and several of them claimed that it was in Saudi Arabia that they first saw it.

In the early lurex cloths of the 1970s the new fibre was used in a way that mirrored the use of imitation silk for decorative effects, namely to weave narrow warp stripes and small areas of supplementary weft floats. Both of these uses continue, although the latter is now rare, both because weft floats in general have been out of fashion since the early 1980s, and because unsupported lurex is not really suitable for float weaving - it tends rapidly to become loose and untidy. Since then however weavers have gradually developed a repertoire of other techniques for incorporating lurex. Warp stripes became wider, and in the mid-1980s designs in which the whole warp (except for a narrow strip of cotton at each selvedge necessary for sewing the cloth strips together) was of lurex became popular (see e.g. samples P002 and P003 in Appendix A, page 411). On these cloths the warp density is quite low and the colour of the cotton weft apparent on the face of the cloth. The first versions of these were mostly of silver lurex with white, pink, or pale blue wefts, and they enjoyed a vogue for weddings. Subsequently a far wider range of colours has been used and they have continued to be popular through the mid-1990s, although they are no longer the latest fashion.

The use of lurex for narrow weft stripes, usually in common with narrow warp stripes, is often seen on a style of cotton cloth mostly produced

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by weavers in Ìlṣorin. The most common versions use white cotton for the warp and weft, with two or four narrow silver, or sometimes gold, lurex warp stripes, and single weft stripes of silver, pink, or blue lurex spaced about a foot apart along the cloth. At Ará Òmí market certain Ìlṣorin weavers sell only this type of cloth, and it is also stocked in large quantities by some stalls at Jankara market in Lagos. Although I was told that it was sometimes bought by men for robes to wear to the mosque I never saw anyone wearing this cloth and it is quite likely that most of it is intended for non-Yorùbá patrons. It is mostly very poor quality, loosely woven and thin, but a shift towards wider strips in 1996 indicates that it is not wholly outside the mainstream developments in aṣọ òkè fashion.

One use of lurex that was very much in fashion in the late 1980s and early 1990s was achieved by plying a strand of lurex together with the four-ply cotton used for the weft, giving a kind of shot effect across the cloth strip. This technique, known to some of the weavers<sup>46</sup> as *ojútónsòrò*, (i.e. the eye that is winking), may be done on its own or combined with the lurex warp style. More recently a lurex warp has been combined with lurex weft stripes, producing areas of thin metallic effect, a technique known as *jakad*, after the imported jacquard. (See sample P032 in AppendixA page412.) Far less common is a cloth where the lurex warp is combined with an entirely lurex weft, producing a rough crinkly cloth, which the weaver of one of the two examples I saw called “sandpaper”(See sample P086 in AppendixA page415.)

The lurex used by aṣọ òkè weavers in Nigeria is almost entirely imported from Japan. In the first eight months of 1995 alone official imports amounted to over 53 metric tonnes<sup>47</sup>, making Nigeria among the largest consumers of Japanese lurex. At present only a limited range is available - unsupported fibres in silver, two shades of gold (the lighter of which is called “butter” by weavers,) bronze, blue, green, red, and pink. It is mostly sold by

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specialist dealers at the major cloth markets<sup>48</sup>, although as we have seen the weavers themselves bring it from Saudi Arabia after the Haj.

### **Design innovation in *aşo òkè* - The Super Q phase**

In tracing the development of *aşo òkè* design from the mid C19th to the present day it is apparent that there has been a gradual process of additions to the technical repertoire, with the established techniques of warp and weft striping being augmented by the introduction of warp ikat, supplementary weft floats, openwork, and carried over threads. Hand-spun cotton, wild silk, and *àlàdí* were gradually supplanted by imported cotton, rayon, and then lurex. Each of these additions to the repertoire of design techniques and the set of materials opened up a wider range of design possibilities explored through a continuous process of incremental design change. Although it has not been possible, given the lack of contemporary documentation, to reconstruct the sources of technical innovation, the evidence points strongly to the interaction of design and technique with the single-heddle loom tradition of southern Nigeria as the context from which major innovations emerged. Innovation may be seen as cumulative, in the sense that additions were made to the set of design possibilities, while earlier techniques, although they may have gone out of favour for long periods, remained part of the available technical repertoire. This overview of long-term change however, is not the perspective on design which confronts weavers working within the tradition on an everyday basis. At any given time the available set of techniques and materials both constrains and enables conceivable design prospects, while the designs that are actually realized will occupy a narrower area still within this range of possibilities. Weavers are not normally concerned with exploring the boundaries of the range, let alone extending them through technical innovation. Instead they will

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be weaving cloth that modifies another recent design in some minor way, a process of incremental change which satisfies customer demand for novelty within an existing fashion.

As we have seen however, major innovatory changes do occur from time to time. The years since 1994 have been a period of rapid transformation, in which a succession of technical and design changes have radically altered the appearance of most *aşo òkè*. We can adopt the most widely used name for the new designs and call this the Super Q phase. We will explore the background to and the contingencies underlying Super Q in subsequent chapters. Although they have had and are continuing to have widening ramifications, their source was neither in the mainstream of the *aşo òkè* weaving tradition, nor in the ever broadening inflow of women weavers to the industry. Instead, as we shall see, it was an influx of Ewe weavers from southern Ghana to the Lagos region promoted by wholesale cloth traders that initiated the innovations. Here we will confine our consideration to the cloth itself and to the description of the changes in cloth design and weaving technology.

In late 1994 some *aşo òkè* weavers in *Ìlọrin* and *Ìsẹ́yìn* began to produce cloth in wider strips. Although there was a considerable degree of variation in the width of the cloth strips in the 1841 Egga collection, since then the width of *aşo òkè* strips has been broadly stable at around 10 to 12 cms, with no particular significance being attached to variations within this range. The sole recorded exception to this was the cloth woven in *Ìlọrin* by the innovatory weaver Alhaji Yaya Olabintan and his imitators. All at once however, something that had for many decades been a taken-for-granted background feature became a focus for innovation. The older standard width of 10 cms or so continued to be woven but more and more cloth was produced in strips of around 14-15 cm width, with, over the following year, some

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weavers continuing to experiment with widths up to 20 cms (See samples P049 and P053 in AppendixA page 413.) Wider strips can be produced on the regular Yorùbá double-heddle loom by simply increasing the width of the heddles and reed, both of which are locally made.

Closely associated with this move to wider strips was the introduction of a new method of utilizing lurex. The normal practice in *aşo òkè* weaving is to use a four-ply cotton weft. By increasing the weft to 8-ply cotton, and increasing the density of lurex in the warp, a ridged effect across the cloth strip is achieved. The ridges are only apparent in the areas where the warp is of lurex, so it can be used for warp stripes or for the whole strip.



Figure 13: One of the fashionable new “Super Q” designs of mid-1996, combining a wider strip with a ridged effect created by the use of an 8-ply weft. Author’s collection.

Wider-strip cloths using this technique were sold as “Super Q” throughout 1995, with other names<sup>49</sup> such as “sequence”, “Suzuki”, and “shun-shun” also heard. The technique was rapidly transferred to the narrower strips, with many of the older lurex designs reproduced in the new style.

A further and even more radical technical innovation followed in late 1995, namely the spread of a decorative technique known as supplementary warp float. An extra warp is prepared separately from the background warp, producing two distinct warp bundles, which are placed on separate drag sleds, allowing the tension in the two sets to be adjusted independently. After the warp threads for the ground weave have been tied into the heddles and through

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the reed in the normal way, the extra warp threads are passed between the strings of both the heddles, before passing them through the reed and attaching them to the cloth beam with the others. When the weaver uses the foot pedals fixed below the heddles to open up and alternate the shed in the main warp, the supplementary warp remains unaffected. The shuttle holding the weft is passed back and forth in the alternating sheds above the stationary extra warp for four or six rows, then below the extra warp for four rows, then above again.



Figure 13:  
Supplementary  
warp float  
weaving  
involves passing  
the weft above  
the extra warp  
for several  
picks, then  
below. The  
technique is  
demonstrated by  
an Ewe weaver,  
Lagos, 1996.

The effect achieved is to have an essentially unwoven set of extra warp threads moving back and forth between the two faces of the cloth. A decorative effect is achieved both by the difference in colour from the ground weave and the difference in texture (See samples P171 and P174 in Appendix A page 420.) The supplementary warps could be single threads or in groups, in lurex or in cotton, confined to narrow stripes or spread across the whole width of the strip.

One final decorative technique was also associated with these changes and became very popular in 1996. This was the alternation of warp colours to produce lines of colour across the strip - by spacing the warp so that every other warp thread is, for example, blue cotton, while the second set is blue



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lurex, or white cotton and black cotton. An earlier version of the same technique (not using lurex) was popular in the early 1950s and is well represented in the Bascom collection, but it has not been much used since and its current vogue is part of Super Q phenomenon.

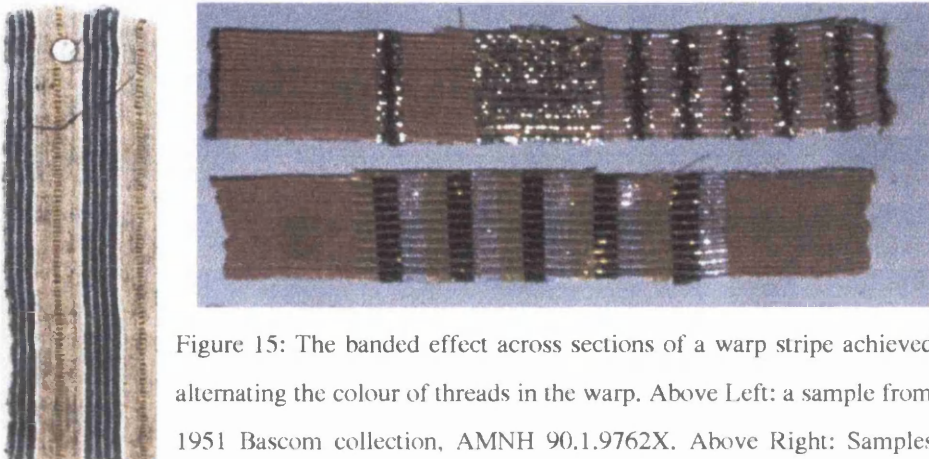


Figure 15: The banded effect across sections of a warp stripe achieved by alternating the colour of threads in the warp. Above Left: a sample from the 1951 Bascom collection, AMNH 90.1.9762X. Above Right: Samples of two designs woven in Èkejò compound, Qyó, in June 1996, Author's collection.

There was, then, a series of innovatory changes in rapid succession, dramatically widening the design repertoire of așò òkè weavers. These events are too recent to form any assessment of their long term implication for așò òkè design. In the short-term though, some cloth was being woven that lacked even a vague resemblance to styles familiar a few years earlier, while other cloth represented a more modest change, incorporating one or more of the new features yet retaining obvious continuities with past designs. Both however were accepted with equal enthusiasm as așò òkè and incorporated into the same tradition of use.

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### **Aṣọ òkè style: one tradition or many traditions ?**

*“Intensely sociable communities do indeed give rise to styles, but such communities are rare. More commonly, social units that are both larger and smaller in scale - elites, classes, gender, or ethnic subgroups, cities or institutions - organize stylistic developments in an ever-shifting visual landscape, responsive to geography, history, trade, and artisan mobility.”*  
(Schneider 1987:415)

Before we move on from the issue of cloth design as manifested in the material artifacts to consider some of the contexts within which the tradition of aṣọ òkè design has evolved a final question remains to be addressed. Is there in fact a single tradition of aṣọ òkè weaving at all, or are we trying to draw together into a single design history what are actually a number of distinct localized traditions ? Alternatively are we artificially isolating aṣọ òkè from a wider sphere on the basis of an assumed association between artifacts and ethnicity ? In other words, is “Yorùbá” the most relevant or appropriate context within which to situate this study ?

It is clear that the history of aṣọ òkè design has indeed been an “ever-shifting visual landscape” that has involved and continues to involve activity on both a larger and a smaller scale than the Yorùbá. Indeed it has taken place over the same period as the development of a modern sense of Yorùbá identity, and, as we will see, played and continues to play a minor role in that process of ethnogenesis<sup>50</sup>.

The early stages of the history of aṣọ òkè weaving are set against a background of large scale international textile trade in which, from the C16th European merchants were purchasing quantities of local cloth from Ìjẹbu and Benin, while large quantities of European and North African cloth was being

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imported in turn. While we have no evidence that narrow-strip cloth from the Òyó Empire was a significant factor in the coastal export trade<sup>51</sup>, the impact on local textile production of all types must have been significant. Overlapping with this sphere was the internal African cloth trade, itself taking place against a background of wide interactions of trade, diplomacy, slavery, and warfare. In the C19th at least some of the design implications of this are apparent in the Òyó and Ìlórin participation in the large-scale inter-regional trade in prestige textiles within the Sokoto Caliphate<sup>52</sup>. As we have seen the three Yorùbá prestige cloths, in some ways the core of the *aşo òkè* tradition today, *etù*, *sányán*, and *àlàárí*, were a shared currency with the Fulani emirs who ruled Nupe and the Hausa states. The long-standing interplay between the design traditions of *aşo òkè* weaving and that of the Yorùbá and other women weavers on the upright single-heddle loom in the lower Niger region is without doubt a major influence on *aşo òkè* design. Then there is the question of interactions with weavers to the west of the Yorùbá, most apparent in the last few years but undoubtedly of considerable antiquity. Finally there is the interaction of Yorùbá weavers with the manifold impacts of the changes intendant on the colonial and post-colonial experience in the Nigerian state.

Without attempting here to delve into the minutiae of these developments, many of which will impinge on later chapters of this thesis, it is apparent then that a series of wider social contexts contributed to the organization of stylistic developments. At the same time *aşo òkè* weaving was also subject to smaller scale, more local, contexts. People from the heartland of the old Òyó empire continue to dominate the weaving of *aşo òkè*, although many have now migrated to other Yorùbá towns. There was a certain amount of regional variation in *aşo òkè* design, the most significant example of which was the use of supplementary weft float weaving in Ìlórin throughout the first half of the C20th. There were also other local cloth designs that were not

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usually woven elsewhere, for example the Ìlọrin marriage cloth illustrated by Lamb (Lamb & Holmes 1980:38)<sup>53</sup>. However most of these seem to have been localized traditions intended for local use alongside, or within, the mainstream of aṣọ òkè design development. When, as happened with supplementary weft float in the 1940s and 1950s, the style became fashionable with a wider consumer base it was rapidly replicated elsewhere. We have seen that in the 1940s weavers in the remote towns of Ìweré and Igàngàn were weaving mostly white or white and blue cloth, while those at Òyó and Igba Ora (a small town but on the main road between Ìsẹyìn and the major prewar cloth market at Abéòkúta) were using a multitude of colours. A similar divergence is apparent today, when weavers from some of these smaller towns do attend the major cloth market in Òyó, but because they do not get orders from the main Lagos traders, are reliant on a local demand which is mostly several years behind the latest fashions.

Despite these regional variations however, it is I think reasonable to conclude that there is now a single tradition of aṣọ òkè weaving, that extends throughout most of the Yorùbá-speaking region, albeit with its focus still on the old weaving towns of the Òyó Yorùbá. There are no longer any regional traditions with their own internal dynamics and independent stylistic development, that might, for example, allow one to identify a specific cloth as having been woven in say Ìbàdàn, rather than Ìsẹyìn. Weavers are unable to describe any design differences between the cloth they weave and that produced in other towns, although they will happily talk at great length about the poor quality of the cloth in, for example, Ìlọrin, compared with their own. More important still however, it that there is now a pan-Yorùbá tradition of wearing aṣọ òkè on certain occasions, and ideas about the appropriate use of the cloth are widely shared. Styles exist, based around materials or techniques used, and choice of style involves a selection among these in purchasing cloth,

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but there is no regional distribution to the weaving of these styles, beyond that imposed by the rate of diffusion of new fashions.

### Notes:

1. Some research of this nature is presently underway at the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ìbàdàn.
2. Akinwumi (1990:140). According to some of the author's informants, the brocade fabric was woven on the broadloom by men from the earliest times because of the secrecy associated with the Ògbóni cult. The first group of women to weave it recorded the feat in the late C19th when their husband Agbaniselu taught them the weaving skills, and many women joined in weaving the *itagbè* or *ṣàkì* in the 1920s.
3. See Lamb 1975:55 & 57
4. The literature on African weaving has little to say about the interaction of weaving traditions or the process of design change within a tradition. Aronson's work (1980, 1992) on Ijèbu/Akwete links and Popo weaving in eastern Nigeria are the only previous treatment of such issues.
5. See Browne 1983 (Asante), Dilley 1987b (Tukolor), and Goody 1982b (Dagomba).
6. The most obvious innovation is the carpentered movable loom frame, which has spread widely since the early 1960s and is now rapidly supplanting the loom built over a mud bench. Even when a row of looms is needed weavers today simply line up a group of frame looms rather than construct a new shed. While surveying the Òyó weavers I observed other variations such as the use of hinged wooden foot pedals (these were confined to the weavers in the Ìsàlẹ Òyó and Akètàn Títún districts and were apparently introduced by a single local carpenter during the colonial period.) There were also a small number of unusual variations in the shape of carpentered loom frames, and of wooden

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drag sleds. One man, locally regarded as a madman, had built a loom and bobbin spinning equipment out of metal piping and old car parts. Elsewhere, in Ibàdàn I encountered two women who had had their loom frames made from welded iron.

7. Bascom's collection is held at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and at the Lowie Museum, Berkeley, California. The cloth samples I collected are deposited at the British Museum.

8. Rival markets are held each 16 days at Òjé, in Ibàdàn, and at Aráòmí, in Òyó, while a third market on a different 16 day cycle takes place in Èdẹ.

9. This view of incremental change is distinct from the notion of drift that occurs over time in the attempt to replicate an existing design (Vansina 1984:145). Weaving technology is such that where this is desired an effectively exact copy of existing designs is possible, but contrary to Vansina's suggestion that "nearly complete handmade imitations were the rule in pre industrial material cultures" (ibid:142), I shall argue that the evidence supports a view that conscious choice underlies a continual exploration of design possibilities in aṣọ òkè weaving.

10. Weaving is generally organized by a master weaver controlling a group of dependent weavers, apprentices and other trainees. See chapter three below.

11. The substantial variation in warp density between cloth woven by trainees and adult weavers, and the wide range of densities in the cloth of adult weavers that Bray (1966) discovered in the course of her mid-1960s research in Ìsẹ̀yìn was no longer apparent 30 years later.

12. This important stage has not been mentioned in earlier published accounts of Yorùbá weaving, but was also recorded in Òyó by Murray in his field notes from the 1940s (Kenneth C. Murray Archive: Weaving file, non-paginated.)

13. O'Hear (1980:180) noted that this was an outmoded technique in Ìlọ́rín, where weavers now used just loops of string on their own to create the sheds

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for weft floats. This change, which may have accompanied the decline in popularity of the technique since the 1970s, can also be noted in Ìsẹ̀yìn and Òyó. John Picton has argued that the similarity of the supplementary string heddles formerly used to the shedding device of the Nigerian single-heddle loom does seem to support a shared origin (1992:24.)

14. Kenneth C. Murray Archive: Lagos File, 1940, non-paginated. See also Clarke 1938, who notes that imported coloured silks had replaced local cotton for weft floats “within the last five years.”

15. Fashion was and remains a key factor in aṣọ òkè design change. See page 371 below. We have no data on the relative proportion of cloth from any of the weaving centres shipped to the north, compared with the southern domestic and export markets. It is clear however that southern cloth traders were able to take advantage of the pax Britannica to compete with local traders in Ilorin (O’Hear 1984.) Dwyer, a Resident in Ilorin at the turn of the century, noted in his report (Rhodes House, Oxford MSS.Afr.s.958, 1902) “Since a Resident has been placed at Ilorin large numbers of petty traders from Oyo, Ogbomosho etc come to trade. This they dare not have done before, for of a certainty their goods would have been seized.”

16. The two samples with the technique in the Bascom collection were obtained in Ogbómòṣó. Dodwell does publish a photograph showing a cloth with writing in weft float weave but it is unclear whether this was taken in Ìsẹ̀yìn or the market at Ìbàdàn.

17. e.g. Interview: Mr. Sanni Adeniyi, Òyó, 10/11/95. There is however an alternative view on the history of supplementary weft float weaving among the Yorùbá, which claims that it was established in Òyó by the early C18th. This theory was most recently advanced by Akinwumi (1990:139), and repeated by Keyes (1993:70), who adds that the Òyó had a monopoly of the technique among double-heddle weavers and probably learnt it from the Bariba. (As we

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have noted on page 35 above Bariba Gando weavers were Yorùbá and Yorùbá-speaking Sábé slaves so this last point seems unlikely.) This theory rests on the interpretation of a reference in Ajayi's brief 1967 biography of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, to the effect that Crowther's father was a weaver who specialized in weaving "elephant cloth". Since weft float designs in the shape of elephants have been woven in the C20th, Ajayi takes this to mean that the cloth referred to also has weft floats. An alternative interpretation is made by O'Hear (1980:187 note 84), who notes that the Hausa robe name *rigan giwa*, robe of the elephant, simply designates a prestigious robe.

However what no one seems to have done is to consult the source cited by Ajayi, namely the far earlier biography published by one of Crowther's contemporaries Jesse Page. There (1908:4) we read: "On his father's side the Bishop belonged to the clan of "Edu" and his grandfather was the Bale or Duke of Awaiye-petu, who had migrated into the Yoruba country from Ketu. He appears to have been a man of great wealth, amassed by the trade of weaving a peculiar fabric, specially designed for the use of the King of Erin, and this "aso elerin" became the recognized production of the family looms." So we have a confusion between the town of Èrìn, the king of which was called the *Ẹlẹ̀ẹ̀rìn* (Abraham 1958:192) and the word for elephant, *erin*, made possible by the lack of tone markings in most of the above texts. Note also that it was his mother, not his father, who's family was from Òyó. Sadly this tells us nothing about the design of the fabric, or about weaving in Òyó. The practice of naming a cloth design after the person for whom it was first woven, particularly an *Ọba*, is well documented for the first half of the C20th (Boyer 1983), so may well be far older.

18. The same design is also sometimes identified as *omólángidi*, an abstractly shaped doll carved for children.



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19. In contrast to the distinctive “tortoise” design that Aronson was able to retrace on single-heddle cloth from Akwete to Ìjèbu-Òde (Aronson 1980).

20. See Kriger 1990:43, and Johnson 1973:357. Johnson suggests Seluk was in Yàgbà country, or in today’s terms, northeastern Yorùbá.

21. They are also very loosely woven. Cloth can be produced more quickly and cheaply by not beating in the weft properly, but this would not be acceptable to most Yorùbá customers.

22. Bristol Museum Ea 12202-5.

23. NAI, DCI 1/1/418/s.5

24. NAI Oyo Prof. 1/1/3939, page 1

25. NAI Oyo Prof. 1/1/3939, page 21

26. Interview: Mr. S. Adeniyi, Òyó, 10/11/95

27. Although I located a few surviving elderly women dyers in Ìbàdàn and Èdè the only local dye they used was indigo in combination with imported indigo. They were unable (or unwilling) to recall any details of the ingredients of earlier local dyes. The fact that Keyes adopts what she describes as an experimental/hypothetical approach (1993:8) suggests she had similar problems. The best source is Bascom and Boyer’s unpublished manuscript (pages 53-67) which draws on Bascom’s 1951 field notes from Òyó. Subsequent comments on dyestuffs are drawn from this unless otherwise indicated. Note also Johnson (1921:124) who mentions only indigo shades, plus *sányán* and *àlàárí*.

28. Robert Farris Thompson writes “the concept of blue as a mean between red and black is very Yorùbá” (1971:36). But note also Keyes unsourced assertion that the prevalence of indigo blue noted by C19th observers from Anne Hinderer onwards reflected a “radical shift” from earlier use of a variety of colours produced from natural dyes (1993:12)

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29. These estimates sound more plausible than the occasional claims in the literature that it took up to a year to dye dark indigo thread for *ẹtù*.

30. Hence Lamb (1980:49-51) is mistaken in asserting that there is a recognized category of cloths known as *aşo aláró*, and that *ópáró* refers to a specific type of cloth. As a senior Ọyọ master weaver told me “*Ópáró ni wípé aşo tí ó bá ti jẹ aláró, ópáró náà ni a ní pé.*” *Ópáró* is that cloth that has been dyed with indigo, *ópáró* is what we call it. (interview Mr. S.Adeniyi, 10/11/95)

31. National Archives, Ìbàdàn: Oyo Prof 2 OD 372 Volume 2, page 10. Strangely the author asserts that there were only two khaki dyers in Ìsẹyìn, although “a good many” in Ọyọ (page 19). Maybe he was mistaken for a tax inspector !

32. John Picton (personal comment 1997) has pointed out that in neighbouring Èbìrà the word for maroon red is *wahara*.

33. National Archives, Ìbàdàn: DCI 1/1/432 Textile Department, Ìlọrin. The government sponsored Textile Development Scheme (see page 192 ) was a major factor in promoting the spread of commercial dyes. Trainees at the centres received instruction in the use of imported dyestuffs for their own weaving. Deacon Falodun, who was trained at the Ọyọ Textile Training Centre in 1947-8 recalls dyeing both local and imported thread for Ọyọ weavers throughout the 1950s (Interview 7/2/1996).

34. K.C. Murray Archive, National Museum, Lagos. “Weaving” File, page 208.

35. National Archive, Ìbàdàn: Oyo Prof 1/1/1757 Volume 4, page 396, dated 18 July 1946.

36. National Archive, Ìbàdàn: Oyo Prof 1/1/1757 Vol 2. Wilkes wrote an extremely interesting three page report in the context of a debate among colonial officials as to the impact of the ban on the export of locally woven cloth, intended to conserve freight space for essential items during the war.

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37. There are three stalls in the main Ọyọ market, Àkèsán, which stock limited quantities of cotton thread and lurex. Since their prices are relatively high weavers only use these as a source for small purchases in an emergency. An alternative was to try to buy thread from another master weaver who had a temporary surplus. There are no shops selling thread and other supplies for weavers in Ọyọ, although some of these exist in the larger weaving centres of Isẹyìn and Ilọrin. However the main source of supply for weavers in Ọyọ was the numerous specialist traders who attend the Aráðmí cloth market held in Ọyọ every 17th day. Weavers who also attend Èdẹ market regularly could buy there as well. Alternatively there are a number of wholesale dealers operating full-time in Ìbàdàn, although the travel expenses would add 80 to 100 naira to the cost.

One of the most persistent sources of dissatisfaction cited by almost all the master weavers interviewed is the high prices charged for, and the intermittent supply of, all types of thread. Among the main suppliers of cotton are ATM of Lagos (cheaper brands but available in red, white, and black only) and Agata Tex of Kano, which has a wide range of colours at higher prices, while most of the "silk" comes from a company called Hafrayon in Kano. All of these firms operate through lists of recognized distributors, who they require to make a substantial deposit and provide bank guarantees. This effectively excludes weavers from bypassing the middlemen and buying direct from the factory. A frequent problem arises when weavers are given orders from samples of cloth woven a few months before and the exact shade of thread is no longer available. The factories are also frequently wrong footed by the sudden rises in demand for particularly fashionable colours, fuchsia cotton being a noticeable recent example. This can lead to rapid and unpredictable price fluctuations as wholesalers try to profit from these temporary shortages.

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38. The economics of this were puzzling. I was able to purchase a bundle of ten strips for N250. Since I was able to purchase a bundle of ten strips for N250. Since a local would certainly have paid less, say N200, this would give a price per strip of only N20-25, compared with N50-100 for regular machine-spun yarn, which would have taken far less time to weave. It is possible however that the weaver, from a very remote town, had no orders or capital to buy other thread.

39. National Archives, Ibadan: DCI 1/1/167/402. page 232 : There was a 20 % duty on rayon, amounting to 1s.7d. per lb, compared to a 4d. per lb duty on cotton imports. Knibb, the Textile Officer in Adó Èkìtì wrote (ibid:243) “My impression is that if Rayon was low in price it would be used to a considerable extent in cloths made entirely from local cotton yarn as very narrow stripes for effect purposes. It is even now used by the local weavers in very small amounts at an exorbitant price of 25s per lb.”

40. Strictly speaking “Lurex” is a registered trade mark owned outside the US by Sildorex SA, which does not supply the Nigerian market. The term will be used colloquially to describe the metallised polyester fibre used there, the vast bulk of which comes from Japan. The type used in Nigeria is technically called “unsupported” i.e. “it is neither bonded to produce a laminate, nor twisted to produce a supported thread” (Higgins 1993:92).

41. Personal comment February 1996.

42. Kenneth C. Murray Archive, National Museum, Lagos: File 65 Yorùbá Miscellaneous

43. European visitors to West Africa frequently commented on the desire of local rulers to accumulate the largest possible variety of different cloths. A local perspective on this is provided by Johnson’s account of the Alááfin’s shiny robe (1921:179) cited above, drawn from a longer Òyó tradition recording the rivalry between the Òyó king and a visiting Popo ruler

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expressed through a competitive display of a range of imported cloths “as often as the King changed his robes, he changed his covering cloth to one of the same material, when the king puts on a robe of silk or velvet, he covers with a cloth of the same material.”

44. Capt.Moll: “Situation economique de la region de Zinder” Renseignements coloniaux (9 Dec 1901. Cited by Marion Johnson (1976:101).

45. In Qyô in 1996 there was only one part-time master weaver who was not a Muslim. In 1938 Murray and Hunt Cooke noted that “Men weavers are almost without exception Mohamedans” (1938:2). Some of the many women who are now taking up double-heddle weaving are Christians (see Chapter 4 below.)

46. A partial list of some of these techniques and their names was made by Wolff and Wahab 1996:11.

47. Company data: The Lurex Company, London.

48. Prices consequently fall sharply in the month or so after the Haj, while weavers try to off load their surplus lurex and free up capital by hawking it around the cloth markets. For the remainder of the year however, while prices of the silver and gold varieties remain fairly stable, the less commonly used colours such as purple and red are liable to fluctuate sharply making pricing of cloth orders difficult. The best brand of lurex is called Nakatex, but apparently less scrupulous dealers are prone to substitute lesser brands in Nakatex boxes. In 1996 the Saudi Arabian government banned most Nigerian pilgrims after a health scare over the outbreak of cerebrospinal meningitis in the north of the country. The usual glut of lurex was averted as a result.

49. See page 334 for a discussion of the continued salience of cloth names. Shun-shun should not be confused with “shine-shine”, a weavers term for lurex. The name shun-shun was also given to a type of imported fabric popular a few years ago, which unfortunately I have not yet been able to identify.

50. See Chapter 6 below.

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51. See page 34 above. Adams' report does confirm that Ọyọ cloth was reaching the coast by the late C18th, but the only record of narrow-strip cloth being exported comes from C19th Brazil. James Wetherall, describing the dress of the women of Bahia, in a book published in 1860 wrote: "A handsome coast cloth is thrown over the shoulder. These cloths are woven in small stripes of coloured cotton from two to four inches wide in striped or checked patterns and the slips sewed together to form a shawl. Those imported from the coast of Africa of the best description are worth at least 50,000 milreis, about 5 pounds sterling. The most expensive, and of course the favourite colour now, is a bluish gray ground with dull crimson stripes." (1860:72) cited in Verger 1976:464.

52. See Perani 1992, Kriger 1993

53. Lamb (Lamb & Holmes 1980:38) says the cloth is called *oparo eleto*. Akinwumi (1990:303) notes that the cloth was called *kokoro aro*, and that up until the 1950s it was the second most important bridal cloth after a single-heddle loom cloth called *alikinla*.

## Chapter Three - The Weaving Compound

### Weaving a tradition: craft, compound and context.

*Ilé ni aláṣọ ní jókòdó tí òkúúkú ní wọ́ tó o*

(Yorùbá proverb: “the weaver sits at home while the sled is being drawn towards him.” Alhaji Ojulare, Ilorin, 24/2/1996)



Figure 16: The weaving shed set up in the open space at the centre of a compound of weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn, April 1994. As is common today the old mud bench looms in the shed have been augmented by separate carpentered loom frames on the left.

The compound, a geographically defined group of patrilineally related individuals, has been represented as the key locus for an understanding of *aṣọ òkè* weaving (see e.g. Bray 1968). Indeed Lloyd, in his early account of Yorùbá craft organization, proposed location within the patrilineal compound as the basis of distinction which he drew between “traditional” and “modern” crafts, exemplified respectively by weaving and carpentry. If the compound does indeed remain a site of tradition, a place where things are handed on, this

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can no longer be conceptualized in terms of such an oversimplified opposition. Weaving, in particular, may be seen to participate fully in a complex of regional and even international interconnections in a way that parallels contemporary Nigerian lifestyles to a far greater extent than more obviously “modern” occupations such as photography, which whatever their source are reliant on a predominantly local patronage.

Nevertheless, we begin our own representation of *aṣọ òkè* weaving today with the compound, before we proceed in later chapters to a consideration of other modes of organizing weavers, which currently supplement and may eventually supplant it. That the compound is key to an understanding of weaving should not be taken to imply that it is a system of “household production” with the associated implications of independent self-sufficient economic units. We will explore in some detail what exactly is being done in an actual weavers’ compound, what is being handed on in the process of weaving that constitutes it as a tradition. Since *Ọ̀yọ́-ilé* and the *Ọ̀yọ́* Empire have played such an important role in the history of double-heddle loom weaving in the region it would seem appropriate to focus our study on the legacy of that history in the present city of *Ọ̀yọ́*. In doing so we will concentrate for most of this chapter on a single compound of weavers, describing it in detail as it was in 1995. Having considered our chosen compound we will attempt to situate it in a wider context by looking at other weavers in *Ọ̀yọ́* and at weavers in other Yorùbá towns. We will also add more of a temporal perspective on the data presented with the help of earlier accounts of *aṣọ òkè* weaving in *Ọ̀yọ́* and elsewhere.

Like many other towns and cities in the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria, *Ọ̀yọ́* may be roughly divided into two areas. There is an older core around the Alààfin’s palace and the central market, Àkẹ̀sán. In this area the majority of houses are still mud-built and grouped in recognized compounds, although



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very few of the old compound walls remain. The Post Office, the Central Mosque, the Catholic Mission, the courthouse, are all located within this core. Beyond this is an ever spreading area of newer concrete-block built houses, arranged along the main roads and filling in the spaces between along unpaved tracks. This area encompasses other markets, including the Aráòmí cloth market, as well as the Local Government Secretariat, the Baptist Mission, St Andrew's College of Education, the Federal School of Surveying, the two main hotels, and numerous mosques, churches, and schools.

Ilé Èkẹjọ Adéşínà is a large compound of weavers near the centre of the inner core, an irregular area bordered on two sides by raised roads leading to the nearby market and palace (see map, page 136). Slightly further up the hill towards the market are Ilé Àrẹmọ<sup>1</sup>, Ilé Alásé, and Ilé Èkẹsàn (also with a large number of weavers). On the other side Èkẹjọ is bounded by Ilé Oníkùnkú and Ilé Àpáta. Èkẹjọ itself is made up of eleven mud-walled houses. The variously shaped open areas around and between the houses, although crossed by numerous drains that flood whenever it is raining, provide a space for the economic activities of the compound, predominantly for the weavers' looms. The same area is foraged by goats and chickens, provides a playground for the smaller children, and is a burial site for the dead.

All the compound residents now regard themselves as belonging to one family descended from the compound founder Bánkólé, although the nature of such links varies (see family tree in Appendix B page 430.) The historic validity of these claims is not relevant here. Although weaving is now the main employment for men in Èkẹjọ compound it is not regarded as the historical occupation of the family. This will become clear from a brief account of the compound's tradition of origin provided by Alfa Amoda<sup>2</sup> the senior living compound member.

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*“The place from where we came to Èkejó is Òyó-ilé. The journey from there to this Òyó where we are is 400 miles. The journey took twelve days, and the sleep in between is eleven. When we were coming there was no food, we ate the fruit of trees... Those of us who were coming were many, the king was in the lead and we followed. Many chiefs followed the Aláàfin to Òyó, among them is the Èkejó Tètù of the Aláàfin. Tètù are many but ours is of the Aláàfin<sup>3</sup>. There were no policemen then, what our role was, as the Èkejó, was that if a person steals, then we are going to behead the person in the name of the Aláàfin. When we were coming, everything that will disturb the Aláàfin, we go forward to clear them. We still have a role to play for the Aláàfin now. If a king is to be installed we have a role to play there. If a king dies we have a role to play as well. Because of our work we are not far from the Aláàfin until today. This is the story of Èkejó compound.”*

Weaving does not feature in this narrative and is not mentioned in the oríkì<sup>4</sup> of the lineage. The compound elders no longer remember when they first became weavers. Nor is there any acknowledged memory of when the conversion of compound residents to Islam began. It is known that Muslims suffered considerable persecution in the immediate aftermath of the abandonment of Òyó-ilé, and that most of the small number who joined Aláàfin Àtìbà at Òyó took refuge with the powerful Pàràkòyí, a chief with responsibility for long-distance traders, in what is now Pàkòyí quarter<sup>5</sup>. Once the immediate threat from Ilorin and the Fulani passed however, the hostility eased and Islam spread rapidly in Òyó during the 1840s and subsequent decades. It is likely that at least some members of Èkejó compound were converted in this period, a hypothesis supported by the appearance of Muslim names such as Mohamedu and Tijani among the sons of the founder, Bánkólé. Both of these, along with Bánkólé himself, are remembered today as having been master weavers.

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The present appearance of Èkejó compound was largely determined by the sporadic building of individual houses by male compound members in the period since the demolition of the external walls in the mid 1940s. The two largest open spaces were cleared for the construction of new houses some years ago but these have yet to be built. Several of the existing mud-built houses are in serious disrepair. In the course of the research period two substantial collapses of mud walls occurred. One of these was rapidly repaired, the second, a large section of the only two storey building in the compound, has been left since the collapse of the remainder of the house also looks imminent. Compound members who have sufficient money prefer to build a new-style concrete house elsewhere in Òyó where space is more plentiful. Within the compound are four groups of fixed looms with mud seats and sheet iron roofs comprising 19 looms in total, plus an additional fixed loom no longer in use, on a house verandah. A further 16 movable<sup>6</sup> loom frames are situated either around the weaving sheds or in separate pairs. The shed of seven looms near Adéşínà street was built by one of the current master weavers in the mid-1970s to replace an earlier one further down the hill where two movable looms stand today. All the other sheds were built since the 1940s when the compound was restructured. Thus the compound as a place plays a significant role in bringing a sense of the past into the present. Although it confronts its youngest members as a received environment, to the old it is a locus of memory, its houses, looms, and graves, a named record of their own achievements and of the lives of their contemporaries.

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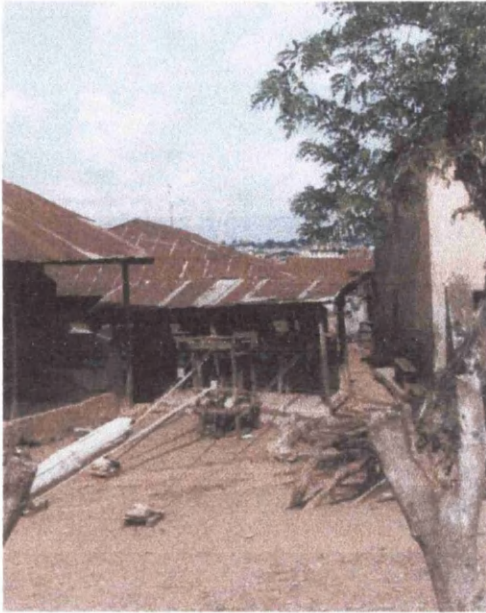


Figure 17: The old weaving shed at the centre of Èkẹjọ compound, July 1995. Much of the two storey building to the left has since collapsed, but the shed was undamaged.

### The Personnel

There is no formal head or *báalé* of Èkẹjọ compound. Any disputes that arise or decisions that become necessary are resolved by ad-hoc meetings of the senior men and women. As the economic mainstay of the compound the master weavers appear to exercise an influence greater than their position in the age structure would strictly warrant. There are two master weavers currently active in Èkẹjọ compound, both men aged about fifty. Alhaji Rasak Kareem controls the smaller group of weavers operating at the four looms at the northern end of the compound. He is descended from the compound founder through a maternal link, his mother, Alhaja Rali Kareem, being a great granddaughter of Bánkólé (Appendix B). Nevertheless he grew up in Èkẹjọ compound and was taught weaving there by his maternal grandfather Alhaji Busari. The second master, Alhaji Moshood Orilonise Fasasi, controls a far larger group of weavers working at the other weaving sheds. He is a direct paternal descendant of the compound founder.

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Figure 18: Alhaji Rasak Kareem, one of the two master weavers currently active in Èkẹjọ compound, July 1995.

In addition to Alhaji Aminu Giwa, a former master weaver who has now retired, there are a number of other older men who have acted as master weavers in the past but are now pursuing other occupations. These include Koranic teaching and tax collecting (Alfa Amoda), selling goats (Liasu Yusuf), government employment (Muraina Yusuf), and farming. Other occupations followed by compound men at present include driving, farming, photography, tailoring, working for the Nigerian Television Authority, selling “traditional medicine”, barbing, and carpentry. All the male compound members learnt to weave while they were young boys, and some of them continued to do so for long periods before taking up other work. For them it remains a possible safety net if they encounter difficulties in their present occupation. Women’s work in so far as it relates to weaving will be discussed below. Other occupations followed by compound women include hairdressing, preparing and selling smoked cow skin, selling charcoal, and trading in the market. One woman runs

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a primary school for at least fifty local children on the verandah of Alhaji Aminu's house,

Many people who retain ties to the compound, and who return to it on important ceremonial occasions, are no longer resident. Compound members are living and working at a variety of occupations in Ìbàdàn, Lagos, and Kano. Others live at houses built elsewhere in Òyó, for example at a house owned by Alhaji Moshood in the Sanga district. As a result of comings and goings between these groups the resident population of the compound was continually fluctuating during the research period but averaged about 110 people. The family tree (Appendix B) does not attempt the massive task of listing every family member claiming descent from the founder Bánkólé. Rather it traces the relationship of the existing weavers and master weavers, together with any other master weavers and dyers still remembered. It was compiled with the assistance of numerous interviews with the older compound members, especially with Alhaji Aminu Giwa. It should be remembered however that although descent is an important principle to the Yorùbá, the tabulation and enumeration of relatives in this way is not. In particular the listing of children or wives is seen as unlucky. Moreover no attempt at dating could be made as most people were vague about their own age, let alone that of their parents or grandparents.

### The Master Weavers

There is no specific Yorùbá term for a master weaver, they are simply referred to as *ògá*, master, or as Alhaji. Nevertheless they are the key figures in organizing weaving within the compound. Like all the other master weavers interviewed, Alhaji Moshood and Alhaji Rasak are themselves former weavers. Alhaji Moshood was trained by his father Alhaji Fasasi in Èkẹjọ

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compound. However Alhaji Fasasi died when Moshood was in his late teens, and there is a second weaver, Alhaji Asikolaye of Kaa Kuta compound that he now regards as his “master”. After his father’s death it was Alhaji Asikolaye who taught Moshood the skills needed to market cloth successfully. Today he runs the only compound in Òyó with more weavers than Ilé Èkẹjọ. As noted above, Alhaji Rasak also learnt to weave at Ilé Èkẹjọ, although his father was from another compound.

Once a weaver becomes a master, a change which as we will see, may at first be more nominal than actual, he operates as an independent business even if he remains within the same weaving shed where he was trained. Although the two masters in Èkẹjọ compound regard each other as brothers and state that they work together, in practical terms they run separate businesses. No instances were noted where they made joint purchases of thread, although they would buy it for each other, or where orders were split between them. A clear sense of belonging to distinct groups was also noted among the weavers and trainees. Those who were apprenticed were clearly attached to a single master. Even when they were not working it was quite unusual to see a weaver from one group at the shed of the other. Despite this however there are some links which will be discussed below.

In addition to supplying the thread and selling the finished cloth, aspects that will be considered later, the master weaver has a range of responsibilities. Firstly he allocates tasks amongst the weavers and junior trainees each morning. This involves a quite detailed breakdown of the work to be done. Junior trainees will be given knots of thread to be wound onto spools or weft bobbins, rolls of lurex thread to be rewound, sent on errands etc.. More senior workers will be told to prepare warps, others to weave a specified amount of a particular design. Secondly it is important for the master weaver to keep his costs under control by maintaining a detailed watch on how much thread is

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used - certain weavers in other compounds were notorious for accumulating large amounts of “spare” thread which they could then weave and sell for their own benefit. The master will know how much thread is needed for a particular design and disputes frequently arise if this is exceeded. Thirdly he needs to exercise a limited amount of supervision over the quality of the weaving and ensure that it is proceeding fast enough to meet his commitments to customers. Fourthly, he collects the finished cloth and makes the necessary payments to weavers. Finally he has to resolve any disputes or disciplinary problems that may arise among the weavers. These duties generally require the master weaver to be present around the compound for a large part of most days when weaving takes place. Usually his presence, rather than any strict supervision, is sufficient to ensure that the weaving progresses at a reasonable rate. However there is a certain degree of conflict<sup>7</sup> with the need to be away cultivating links more widely. In particular he has to meet with customers many of whom may be a day’s journey away in Lagos, but projecting the necessary presence within Òyó is also important both to secure local orders and to ensure an adequate flow of apprentices. It is the master weaver who links the business to that of other weavers in Òyó and elsewhere via his membership of formal organizations of weavers and his personal ties to other master weavers.

Neither Alhaji Moshood nor Alhaji Rasak normally wove themselves. Alhaji Moshood was never observed weaving in the research period. Instead he would generally sit, or lie, on a wooden bench on the verandah overlooking the shed where most of his weavers worked. Here he would talk with friends, greet passersby on the footpath that traversed the compound, send the younger weavers on errands, and issue the occasional instruction or rebuke to his workers. Alhaji Rasak, perhaps because he had fewer workers, often laid out warps and prepared warp bundles himself, and would sometimes sit in a loom



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and weave for a few minutes if problems emerged. He also liked to make new reed beaters, a task requiring considerable patience and application. When he was not working he didn't overlook the looms, preferring to sit on the verandah of his house facing the road at the other end of the compound.



Figure 19: Alhaji Moshood Fasasi seated on the veranda from where he supervised the activities of his trainee weavers. He is tying the woven strips of cloth into the standard bundles in which they are sold. October 1995.

### Dependent Weavers

Amongst the weavers working for Alhaji Moshood were a number of young men who had completed their training some years before but opted to remain with him as dependent weavers. At the start of research in June 1995 these included the Alhaji's junior brother Ismail (aged 25), two of his sons Kazeem Fasasi (21), and Waidi Fasasi (20), four compound members from the Yusuf branch of the family - the brothers Nurudeen (24), Lukuman (20), Kchinde (20), plus their cousin Mumini (19). The remaining two, Morufu Ajekigbe (23) and Wasiu Ajibade (20), were from the neighbouring Onikunku compound. Early in February 1996 at the end of Ramadan, Ismail, Kazeem, and Waidi all left. Kazeem, who had acted as his father's deputy in supervising the younger weavers wished to set up a separate business. His father bought him a loom (at

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a cost of N700) and he began to weave on his own on land outside his father's house in Sanga district. Early in 1997 he gave up weaving when he got the opportunity to go on a course to train managers for rural cooperative societies. Ismail initially said he would become a trader but by May he had set up a loom alongside Kazeem's. Waidi was bored with weaving and became an apprentice at the sawmill on the Ìbàdàn road. None of Alhaji Rasak's weavers were really in this category. His eldest son Issa (aged 21) had long since finished training, but because he found the routine of weaving for long periods disturbing, normally kept to the junior weavers' tasks of preparing thread and laying out warps for his father.

In terms of the weaving itself there was very little difference between that assigned to dependent weavers and that done by the more proficient trainees. Both were capable of weaving the full range of designs, although the older weavers had a slight edge in terms of speed and quality of weaving<sup>8</sup>. They were also able to rely on the trainees for the preparation of thread and the setting up of warps. However the major difference between the dependent weavers and the more senior of the trainees was an economic one - the dependent weavers were paid for their work and were free to accept work from other master weavers outside the compound. We will discuss these aspects below.



Figure 20: Nurudeen Ademola, aged 24, one of the more senior of the dependent weavers at Ilé Èkẹjọ.

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### Trainee Weavers

Some of the trainees are taken on for formal apprenticeships, others are there on a more or less ad hoc basis, the key factor being the closeness of their parents' ties to Èkejó compound and the master weavers. Children from the compound itself are never apprentices (*omọ iṣẹ*), while those from outside usually have formal contracts for fixed periods (see Appendix B for a list of weavers in Èkejó compound and copies of apprenticeship contract.) The fees charged depend partly on the length of the contract, as earlier accounts (e.g. Bascom and Boyer nd.:17) suggest, but are also influenced by parental ties, and by the relative need of the master weaver for new apprentices and for cash at the time. An approximate range would be from N500 to N5000 (US\$ 5.50 to US\$ 55.00 in 1995). The conclusion of a formal apprenticeship is marked by a small ceremony, at which the graduate is required to feed the compound and guests who will include the head of the weavers' organization and other senior weavers. He or she will be presented with a certificate of proficiency (see Appendix B). Suliya Moshood, who was then sixteen, completed a three year apprenticeship in February 1996. She is from a nearby compound in Òyó. Her link to Èkejó was that her mother sold household goods in the regular Aráḡmí cloth market from a stall next to that used by Alhaji Moshood. She was planning to weave by herself on a loom set up at her parents' house, but was unable to do so before her freedom ceremony. In the meantime she was working (not as a weaver) for relatives in Ìbàdàn to raise money to pay for the ceremony. Some of the apprentices at Èkejó write the date of the start of their contract in chalk on the iron roof above their loom position so they are able to remember precisely how much longer they have to serve.

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Figure 21: Suliya Moshood, the first girl to be taken on as an apprentice in Èkẹjọ compound. She is unfastening the threads of a stored set of heddles, reed, and foot pedals before tying in a new warp. Note the warp bundle held under her right foot.

Others however start much younger and train for a longer period - in March 1996 Alhaji Rasak took on a ten year old girl, Kabira Salawu, from the neighbouring Ilé Àrẹ̀mọ̀, who will remain an apprentice for at least six years.

Primary education is free in Nigeria, and all of the weavers at Èkẹjọ have attended school up to the conclusion of primary school, known as primary six, usually at about age 12. Continued registration beyond this seems to vary with the interest and aptitude of the student and the attitude and resources of the parents. The costs of secondary school, in particular examination fees, can be prohibitive for many parents, and apprenticeship is often regarded as a cheaper alternative. However a number of the trainee weavers from within the compound were still registered at secondary schools. It is possible to combine school substantial amounts of weaving since the school day ends at 1 pm, but absenteeism is also common<sup>8</sup>. On occasions one of the master weavers would

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remind someone that he should be at school, but others who were apparently still registered at school seemed to be weaving every morning for long periods.

Young children from the compound often played in the weaving sheds, watching the weavers, and sometimes mimicking their actions with discarded bits of thread. From the age of about nine or ten, the boys are enlisted to work on some of the preliminary tasks of weaving. Whether they are children of the compound or new apprentices the stages of their training are the same. The first task that Alhaji Moshood set for a new trainee was to practice manipulating thread and tying knots. He or she was given a length of cotton and sat there for hours at a time breaking it into short lengths and tying it together again. After a few days of this the trainee is then taught the various processes to prepare thread for weaving, a stage which will be continued for at least a year. The next stage is to learn how to spread out the warp threads, a process that requires a degree of concentration and some numerical ability. The trainee then learns the complicated procedure of threading the finished warp into the reed and heddles. He will begin to weave for short periods when one of the other weavers is away from the loom, starting with the simple plain weave designs. Junior apprentices also spend a substantial amount of time running errands for the master and the older weavers. These include buying extra thread, taking messages, fetching water from the communal taps or wells, and buying cooked food at mealtimes. Eventually he or she will be assigned his own loom position in the weaving shed and begin weaving regularly alongside the others.

Throughout the training process most learning is done by watching other more senior weavers at work. No cases were observed where the master or one of the senior weavers would explicitly sit down to teach something to the trainees. However once a mistake had been made or a fault in a piece of cloth noticed a more senior weaver would intervene to correct the error. Any

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trainee who carried on weaving something that was clearly set up wrongly, thereby wasting the expensive thread, risked a severe scolding, or even a beating from the master weaver. Apprentices and other trainees receive no payments for their work, although they are given money for their meals if they live in the compound, and may get small gifts on Islamic feast days and other occasions. Their relation to the master is modeled on parental authority over children, and the same strict discipline and deference to elders are applied. Between the individual weavers relative seniority is established on the basis of the length of time they have been with the group rather than by age - thus mirroring the system applied to incoming wives in a Yorùbá family.

The gradual movement of the personnel of the weaving enterprise through the various stages of the training, to “freedom” where applicable, to dependent weaver status, and then to become masters in their own right, results in a steady turnover of workers in the course of each year. As already mentioned three of Alhaji Moshood’s weavers left after Ramadan early in 1996. This was by mutual agreement, in the case of Kazeem and Ismail, because Alhaji Moshood considered it appropriate for young men to try to achieve success on their own. It was evident that although Kazeem and Ismail nominally became independent with this move, the bulk of their work at first was passed on to them by the two masters in Ilé Èkẹjọ on a dependent weaver basis. A fourth weaver left in the middle of his apprenticeship, signing up to a new contract at a nearby barbers shop. These losses were offset by an influx of new apprentices. In the course of the same year Alhaji Rasak retained all of his existing weavers but took on two new apprentices.

The departure of Kazeem and Ishmail was typical of the pattern noted in Èkẹjọ and elsewhere. The adult men in Ilé Èkẹjọ pursue, as we have seen, a wide range of occupations. As with most other weaving compounds, there are numerous boys and young men weaving, supervised by a far smaller number



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of much older master weavers. When men reach their early to mid-twenties they are expected and encouraged to achieve an independent career, if possible in some occupation outside weaving. Weaving becomes a fallback option for the lazy, the un-enterprising, or those unlucky in their other careers. One of Alhaji Moshood's uncles, a man in his thirties who was nominally a seller of traditional medicine but often earned small sums of money by preparing thread for the weavers, was an example of this group. Although treated respectfully to his face, it was apparent that he was not taken quite seriously by even the younger weavers. In general it is only when they have achieved a degree of success elsewhere, and if possible amassed some capital, that men in their late thirties or forties return to the weaving industry as master weavers, perhaps on the death of their father.



Figure 22: the second of Alhaji Moshood's weaving sheds at Ilé Èkẹjọ. On the right starched thread is hanging out to dry, while beneath it one of the senior women of the compound is spreading out some of the charcoal she prepares for sale in the market.

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### The Transmission of a Tradition

Clearly it is primarily in the relationships between and within these three groups of participants in the weaving process, the master weavers, dependent weavers, and trainees, that the nature of the contribution made within the compound to sustaining the tradition of *aşo òkè* weaving may be understood. To recapitulate, tradition involves a handing on of the past, an attitude towards the past as a source of action in the present, a selection out of what is handed on, and just as importantly, a greater or lesser degree of receptiveness to innovation and creativity. This process encompasses both the technical skills of weaving which are transmitted to new trainees and a more abstract understanding of ways of proceeding into which weavers are socialized over a longer period as they move towards becoming independent master weavers. We will start with the concrete, with the details of the weaving process itself, proceeding roughly in the order noted above in which trainees learn the various tasks involved in preparing thread and beginning to weave.

### Preparing the threads for weaving

The smooth flow of work by the weavers requires a steady supply of prepared thread which is supplied to them by the younger trainees, who spend most of the first year or more of their training at this work. As we saw in the previous chapter there are currently four types of thread used in weaving *aşo òkè* - cotton, lurex, rayon 'silk', and "mirai". Cotton thread is called *òwú* in Yorùbá. Cotton thread used in *aşo òkè* weaving today is virtually all machine spun. In Èkẹjọ Compound they have not had an order for cloth using handspun cotton, *òwú ríran* (i.e. spun cotton), for at least four years. Machine spun cotton is bought in wrapped bundles of 24 knots (*èèkùn*) of thread, an amount known as an *ìgàn*<sup>9</sup>. It is used for the warp threads on some designs, and for virtually all wefts. Preparation for the warp requires that the thread first



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be treated with starch, reducing its tendency to break under pressure. Groups of four or five knots of thread are untangled from the bundle to form loops about 60 centimetres long. The starch solution is obtained by dissolving a lump of *ẹ̀bà*, a local staple food made from ground cassava, in a shallow metal basin of water. The knots of thread are then immersed in the liquid, rubbed thoroughly, then twisted to squeeze out the excess liquid. They are then hung up in long rows on some of the various bamboo poles that dot the compound for use as washing lines (see Figure 21.) In the hot sun they quickly dry into stiff loops caked with starch. A junior trainee will be detailed to rotate them on the pole after a few hours. By putting both arms through the loop and rotating it over the smooth pole for a few moments much of the excess starch may be flaked off.

Once the thread is dry it is gathered up and carried to a shaded area, either a house verandah or the rear of the platform in the weaving shed, to be wound onto bobbins. The thread is separated into individual loops and rubbed between the fingers to remove any remaining lumps of starch, then two loops are placed together around the four upright sticks of a device called an *àkàta*. This is a crosspiece formed by two flat sections of wood, with thin sticks standing upright in drilled holes at each end. A round piece of wood at the underside of the centre of the cross fits loosely into the mouth of an old glass bottle which has been cemented into a discarded metal food bowl. The weight of the bottom section, known as the *sùgùdù* keeps it still, while the light *àkàta* can rotate freely. The bobbins used for the warp these days are the small grey plastic reels on which lurex is bought, but lengths of bamboo were used in the past. The bobbin is put on the metal axle held in a carpentered frame called simply *ẹ̀rò* (the Yorùbá term for any machine<sup>10</sup>). The axle is connected by a rubber belt to a wooden disc about 15 centimetres in diameter. By turning a handle on this disc the bobbin is rapidly rotated drawing the thread in two-ply

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from the loops. As a result of both problems with the original thread and the rigors of the starching process tangles, knots, and breaks are frequent, often requiring the worker to stop and retie the thread by hand. If a number of warps are to be prepared using the same colour the bobbins will be filled up, but if only a single warp is needed each bobbin may only be half-filled. When all the thread needed is on bobbins they are set aside or passed on to whoever will spread out the warp.

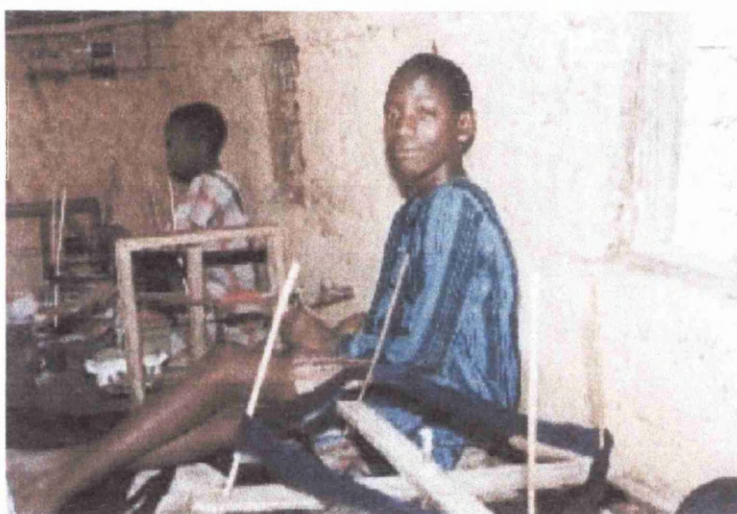


Figure 23: Preparation of the thread. Trainee weavers at Alhaji Rasak's weaving shed transfer thread onto a weft bobbin (centre) and a warping spool (back).

Weft threads are not starched. The process of winding them onto bobbins is the same but short sections of thin bamboo rod, known as *àkò* (or *àkárò*), are used in place of the plastic reels. The *àkò* fits directly inside the shuttle, *òkò*, used for weaving. However weft threads are normally used either four-ply or eight-ply, in which case four or eight knots of thread will be placed together on the *àkàta* and drawn off at the same time. No attempt is made to actually twist or ply the threads together. A variation is to combine four-ply cotton with a single strand of lurex - to prepare this a spool of lurex will be placed somewhere where it can rotate freely (on a stick in a second *sùgùdù*, hung on a string from the shed supports or even on a stick held between the

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worker's toes). Lurex can then be drawn onto the weft bobbin together with the cotton thread.

Rayon 'silk' is called *sílíkì* in Yorùbá. It is bought in packets of twenty knots (in this case the Yorùbá terms *ìgàṇ* and *èèkùn* seem not to be used.) It is never used for the weft. To prepare it for spreading in a warp it is wound onto bobbins using the old lurex reels in the same way as for cotton, except that it is used in single threads.

Lurex, metallised plastic thread, is called "*shine-shine*" or "*ṣaini*" by the weavers. It is bought on small grey plastic reels, which are packed in boxes of ten, although single reels can be purchased from the local dealers. As we have seen, these reels are used in spreading the warp threads so there is no need to process lurex before using it for the warp. However it often happens that the weaver will wish to spread ten or more threads of a particular colour of lurex at the same time when preparing the warp, but have only purchased the five reels or so he needs to complete the cloth. In this case part of the thread will be rewound onto an old reel using the usual winding device. We have already noted that a single lurex thread is often wound in combination with four cotton threads in preparing weft bobbins. Sometimes an entirely lurex weft is used, usually for weft stripes, very occasionally for the whole weft. In this case it is necessary to prepare the weft bobbin using cotton first before winding on the lurex as lurex on its own will slip around on the bobbin. A thin layer of cotton is wound evenly along the whole length of the bobbin, then more is wound on to form little balls at each end. The lurex can then be wound on to fill up the gap left in the centre of the bobbin.

The last type of thread has only come into use by Yorùbá weavers in the 1990s. Called either "*mirai*" or "*cone*", it is a synthetic thread bought by the weavers on large cone-shaped spools intended for use in industrial textile production. Thicker and more lustrous than cotton, but less so than rayon, it is

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also used only in single threads and only for warp threads. Before it can be spread for the warp it must be transferred from the large spools onto the usual reels.

### Preparation of the warp

The person who is to prepare the warp will be told how many threads of each colour he or she is to spread out and for how much cloth. As we have seen in the previous chapter the thread count may be estimated or a count made from a sample. It was at least a year before the trainees would begin to set out warps since a degree of reliability and numerical skill is required. The Yorùbá term for preparing a warp is *ta aṣọ*, literally to spread or stretch out cloth, or *òwú*, to spread thread. The usual number of threads spread for a four inch wide warp was 110 of two-ply cotton or single-ply silk, although there was some occasional slight variation.

The warp is laid out along a series of metal spikes stuck into the ground in two rows approximately twenty metres apart. In Èkẹjọ compound there are two spaces where all the warps were prepared, so the weavers know from long familiarity where to place the pins to prepare a desired length of cloth. There would be usually be four, five, or six, pins in each row depending on the length required. About 30 centimetres inwards from the first and last spike further spikes were placed to secure the crossovers in the warp. In laying out the warp, *òwú títa*, up to about twenty spools of thread are slotted onto a length of wood (*ọdàádàà*) fitted with a series of thin metal rods each about 15 centimetres long. The colours are not laid in the order in which they will appear in the final cloth, all threads of the same colour will be laid out together regardless of whether they will form a single block or a series of warp stripes.

Once all the bobbins required for a single colour are loaded on the warping pole, the person spreading the warp ties together the ends of the

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threads from pairs of adjacent reels. He or she then loops all the joined threads over the first spike, crosses them around the second spike in the same line, walks slowly down to the other end of the layout allowing the reels to unwind, loops the threads around the outside of the first two spikes at the end, returns to the start, continuing up and down until the final pair of spikes are reached. The threads are then crossed around the inner spike of the pair before a final loop around the last one. If a further set of the same number of threads is needed the process is simply repeated in the reverse direction. If a lower number of threads are required some of the reels can be removed at this stage. The warper then moves on to repeat the process with the next colour until the whole warp has been spread. Each colour is then eased slightly apart at each cross, at the two inner spikes, and a loop of spare thread tied through each to secure the crosses separately. Three or four further loops of thread are tied loosely around the entire warp at intervals along the length.

Note that although only one cross is needed for weaving it was normal practice to make a cross at both ends of the warp. This was so that it would be possible at a later date to cut off the section of warp tied into a loom, unroll the bundle and reset it to weave from the other end. This was done on a number of occasions at Èkẹjọ compound when the completed cloth was urgently required by a customer - by splitting the warp it could be woven in two pieces on separate looms. It was also useful as a precaution in case one end became irretrievably entangled, perhaps by one of the numerous goats that wandered the compound.

Once all the threads have been laid out, the next stage is to roll them up into the warp bundle in a way that allows them to be unwound easily as weaving progresses. The spikes at the start are pulled up and the whole loop of thread with the tied crossovers in the various colours is rolled around between the fingers to keep it together. If the warp is of silk or of lurex, the end is

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wrapped around a wooden rod about 50 centimetres long. The weaver then walks along the rows of thread gradually winding it up onto the rod, twisting the rod and dipping it under the warp so that the thread taken up wraps it from end to end repeatedly, finally forming an even cylinder. When the cross at the other end is reached it is also wound into a single thick loop and the warp is ready to be fitted into the loom. The rod used helps to prevent the thread from tangling, but is not needed if the warp is cotton. For a cotton warp the weaver walks along the first row winding the thread around his thumbs with his arms half spread. At the start of the second row this length of thread is doubled over to form the base around which the remainder of the warp is wound.

Prepared warps are frequently kept in that state for some time as the plans for weaving are re-jigged to fit in more urgent orders, or until the necessary thread for the weft is ready. Once it is decided to start weaving the person who will weave the cloth has first to arrange the various colours in the desired order to produce the warp stripes, a complex procedure already described in the previous chapter. This requires considerable concentration and is not done by the trainees who often lay out the warps. It is only when they have progressed from occasional short spells of weaving to a more regular role as weavers that they are expected to master this stage.

The next task, fitting the warp through the heddles, is normally carried out sitting in the loom where it will be woven. The weaver uses his feet to hold the warp bundle still on the ground, then untwists the loop and takes the threads one pair at a time to place them through the eye of the heddles, which are suspended in front of him from the warp beam of the loom (see photo). The heddles (*omú*) are made from two short lengths of thin wooden rod, between which nylon cord forms a pair of intersecting loops to hold each

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thread. Each pair of threads from the bundle is taken in turn, the end loop is broken and the first is slid through the eye in the front heddle then between the strings of the back heddle, the second passed between the strings of the front heddle and through the eye of the back one. Thus when the heddles are drawn apart in the loom a clear shed is created in the warp. Although it is possible to tie in any new pattern each time as described above, the usual practice at Ilé Èkẹjọ and elsewhere is to keep the unwoven end threads from the previous piece of cloth still through the heddles. A new warp can then simply be tied to the ends of the old one and drawn through the heddles far more quickly. Any error in this process becomes immediately apparent once weaving is started since three threads or pairs of threads will be kept together, producing a warp, float <sup>on</sup> one face of the cloth and a weft float on the reverse. This mistake was only observed on one occasion at Èkẹjọ. It was corrected not by unthreading the heddles and beginning again but by adding an additional pair of loops to one of the heddles, breaking the thread that was in the wrong place, then retying it through the correct heddle.



Figure 24: Each thread of a new warp is tied in order to the equivalent thread on an old warp left in the heddles. The new warp can then be drawn through the heddles far more quickly than by inserting it through the nylon loops of the heddles from scratch.

Once all the warp has been placed through the heddles, the weaver begins to thread it through the reed beater (*àsà*) in the same order. Two loops

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of cotton are usually tied around the base of the reed to indicate the desired width of the strip to be woven. Generally the threads will be spaced evenly across the whole width, with two or four to each space in the reed, but if required the threads can be packed more densely for a particular stripe and spread out elsewhere. The threads are laid flat on the face of the reed and a thin section of palm rib used to push them through the gap. The warp may now be fixed to the cloth beam (*agbónrin*) of the loom and weaving commence.

### The Loom<sup>11</sup>

This section should be read in conjunction with the description of the weaving process itself that follows. The weaver sits either in a carpentered frame or beside others in a weaving shed consisting of a mud bench (*tagé òfi*) faced with cement, covered over by a corrugated iron roof - Lamb's suggestion that these be regarded as two different types of loom (Lamb and Holmes 1980:32) seems unnecessary as the weaving apparatus itself is identical in both cases. The loom is called *òfi*, with no distinction made in Yorùbá between the shed form and the carpentered frame. In front of the sitting weaver the warp threads are attached to the cloth beam (*agbónrin*), by means of a small length of wooden rod, the *igi ọmú*, around which the warps, separated into three or four groups, will be tied. This rod is fixed at both ends to the cloth beam by about 10 centimetres of string, so that when the cloth beam is rotated the warp, with the rod, is rolled up around the beam. In Èkẹjọ compound the cloth beams were made from lengths of metal piping, through which four holes had been drilled at the right hand end, although elsewhere some weavers still use wooden beams. A metal pin, the *àyínşọ* (or *ọpa òyínşọ*), fits through the holes in the cloth beam and is braced against the edge of the weavers seat to maintain the tension in the warp as the cloth is rolled up on the beam. The beam itself is held in place by the tension of the warp in two notches in the face of posts,



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èrúkò, either side of the weaver. These posts are set into the mud of the weavers seat, or fixed to the sides of the carpentered frame. In front of the cloth beam the warps pass through the thin slats of palm rib set in the rectangular frame of the reed (àsà) which is suspended by a cord from a flexible cross-stick, the wááwàà, (or òwáwà) in the roof or loom frame. This cross-stick, which also supports the heddles, is not fixed in place but held against a nail by the tension of the heddles, so it can be removed as the weavers sets up or dismantles his work at the start or end of the day. The warps then pass through the two heddles as described above. The heddles as a whole are called *omú* while the wooden rods that support the string loops are *òkù omú*. The two heddles are linked above by a cord passing over a pulley attached to the wááwàà and operated by foot pedals below such that if one is depressed the other is automatically raised forming a shed between the two sets of warps. The pulley (*òkéké*) is a roughly cylindrical piece of wood or an old cotton reel held in a metal frame. Two types of pedal (*itesè*) were used in Èkẹjọ compound. Most weavers used one of the plastic discs broken from the end of a lurex reel, held under the toes with the string passing between the first and second toe. The second type, used by only two weavers, is a thin length of stick - one end is tied to the cord from the heddles and held about 10 centimetres off the ground, the other end trails on the ground but is loosely tied by a second cord to the top of the front posts of the loom.

The warp threads then extend over a second horizontal beam, the wooden warp beam (*pàko*), which is held in place between two large nails on the top of a pair of front posts, the *òpófí*, either side of the weaver. On the carpentered frame the *pàko* slots onto the front of the frame, but is still removable. In front of the loom the warp threads are stretched out for several yards before reaching a bundle rolled up on a rectangular wooden dragsled, the *òkùku*. The warps are tied to a short piece of wooden rod attached by a cord

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about 20 centimetres long to the front of the sled, so the warp bundle itself is not unwound by the tension in the threads. A stone weight placed on the sled is sufficient to maintain the tension while allowing it to be drawn forward as woven cloth is wound onto the breast beam.

### The Weaving Process

When the weaver arrives for work in the morning he or she carries a rolled up bundle consisting of: the cloth woven so far wrapped around the cloth beam; the bundle of the rest of the warp; the heddles and pulley; the reed and the foot peddles. Sitting in the loom frame with these items in his lap, he carefully untangles them. The pulley with the cords supporting the heddles is strung on the crossbar, together with the cord suspending the beater. The woven cloth on the cloth beam is unwound for 25 cm or so, so that the cloth beam can be fitted in the notches on the side posts. The weaver then steps out of the loom, replacing the cloth beam behind him. He carries the sled to the required distance from the loom (between about 10 and 25 metres depending on personal preference and the space available). He then unrolls the warp bundle to the same distance, hooks the warp around the stick at the front of the sled, and places bundle and weight on the sled. Once he has returned to the loom, a second weaver, or a junior trainee will then help him by drawing the weighted sled back until he is satisfied the warp is at the appropriate tension. He is then ready to begin weaving.

The weaver also brings an old plastic carrier-bag holding a variety of additional equipment, which he will keep by his side when weaving. In this bag he keeps: his shuttle (*okò*), a smooth boat-shaped wooden dish about 20 centimetres long; a spare shuttle; numerous bamboo weft bobbins, some charged with thread; the rectangular “sword”, *apàsà*, used when adding weft

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float patterns; a piece of candle wax; a tape measure; some razor blades. It also holds some short thin sections of palm rib used when starting a new cloth - three or four of these will be inserted through the warp after it is attached to the cloth beam to form a firm base against which the first few rows of the weft can be beaten in.

The weft thread is held on the bamboo bobbin (*àkô*) that rotates freely in the shuttle on a section of a thin flexible leaf spine, the thread leaving the shuttle through a small hole in the centre of one side. In order to weave smoothly and at a steady pace the weaver must coordinate three separate actions. He opens up the shed in the warp by using his feet to depress the right and left pedals alternately - some younger weavers keep both feet off the ground and move their legs up and down, others rest their heel on the ground and flex their ankles. He throws the shuttle from right hand to left through the warp, then back and forth, one pass to each alternation of the shed - the shuttle describes a slight curve through the air, on its side so that the rounded base contacts the face of the reed, which together with the rattle of the bobbin in the shuttle makes the regular click-clacking noise characteristic of a group of weavers at work. He beats in each pick of the weft with the reed - the opposite hand from the one holding the shuttle draws the reed forward, usually holding it at the side<sup>12</sup>. As weavers grow more experienced their ability to concentrate on and coordinate these three actions evenly increases, leading to faster and better quality weaving. However even the most adept weavers suffer some interruption to their rhythm every couple of minutes at the most.

Amongst the reasons for this are: using the reed twice after a single pick of weft; dropping the shuttle - even the best weavers do this every thirty or so picks; occasionally they press down with the side of the hand or the forearm on the already woven cloth to tighten it; single threads in the warp break - a

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conscientious weaver will locate the broken thread and retie it, trimming off the loose end with a razor blade once it is woven in, but many don't bother, leaving small faults in the completed cloth; threads in the warp tangle and stick together, especially on overcast days - this is remedied by sliding the hand down to separate the two sets of warps, and sometimes by rubbing the threads with candle wax<sup>13</sup>.

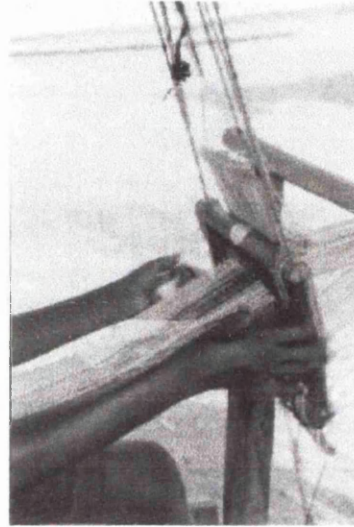


Figure 25: The weaving process - the shuttle is passed back and forth in the alternating sheds created using the foot pedals attached to the base of the heddles. Each pick of the weft is beaten in using the reed.

After the weaver has completed about 15 to 20 centimetres of cloth he will need to wind it up onto the cloth beam. This is done by holding the beam with the left hand, pulling up the pin that braces the beam, slotting it back through the next set of holes and using it as a handle to rotate the cloth beam drawing the warp and sled forwards. When so much cloth has been woven that the sled is close to the loom the next section of the warp will be unwound and the sled carried back to its original position. Where the design calls for the production of stripes across the weft of the cloth, the weaver will have two shuttles charged with the different threads required and will switch between them as

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appropriate. Usually the width of stripes and the spacing between them will be estimated rather than counted or measured each time.

#### **Decorative Techniques: an example of innovation within the compound.**

Once the new weaver becomes proficient at plain weaving, the regular alternation of one set of wefts over and under each set of warps, which is the basic and predominant form of *aşo òkè* weaving he will take any opportunities that arise in the flow of designs woven to master the repertoire of decorative techniques. These, as we have seen<sup>14</sup>, include openwork, supplementary weft float, warp ikat, and, most recently, supplementary warp float. Since the master weaver chooses which designs each weaver will work on he is able to decide at what time it is appropriate for a trainee to take on a new technique. He will have a good idea of how proficient the trainee is in his existing work and may tell him to watch one of the older weavers (something he has certainly done many times already) before attempting the design.

The final technique, supplementary warp float, is a new addition to the design repertoire of Yorùbá weavers as a result of the presence of Ewe weavers competing in the *aşo òkè* market. We will discuss the circumstances of the introduction of this innovation more generally later in this thesis. Here we will concentrate on the technique itself as it was adopted in Èkẹjọ compound, since it provides an interesting case study of a process of innovation and adaptability. Although the Òyọ weavers had seen a few samples incorporating this technique from about May 1995, the first time either of the master weavers at Èkẹjọ received an order for it was in late October. Although they had spoken to other weavers about the novel design technique none of them had actually seen it being done. Inevitably therefore there was a degree of experimentation needed. A small crowd of the other

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weavers gathered to watch as Kazeem and Alhaji Rasak<sup>15</sup> together set up the loom for the first time.

Supplementary warp float weaving involves, as its name suggests, the addition of extra warps to those used to produce the basic cloth or ground weave. The extra warps are continuous along the cloth strips, and are floated over one or other face of the ground weave, producing a decorative effect through variations in colour and texture from the ground weave. The problem facing the weaver is to keep the extra warps in tension so that they are tight to the faces of the finished cloth, while holding them in a position where they don't hinder the interlacing of the weft and main warp to produce the ground weave.

The warps needed for the ground weave are tied into the loom in the normal way using the main set of string heddles, but the supplementary warps pass between the strings of both the main heddles so are unaffected by the action of alternating the shed in the warp. On this first occasion the extra warp was wound up in the same bundle as the main warp, but it soon became apparent that it was better to have a second warp bundle on another sled, allowing the tension to be adjusted separately. In order to manipulate the supplementary set of warps the weavers experimented with a variation of the use of a secondary string heddle and sword, as used in the process of weaving weft floats, the difference being that the warps would need to be pulled from below as well as above. Since the supplementary warp for this design (see sample Pl43 in Appendix A, page 418) consisted of small groups of floating warps spaced across the strip, the heddle used to draw them up could be made by tying a loop of string so that it passed around each bundle of the extra warps. For the heddle to pull the warps down however, it was necessary to create a more complex heddle in which a string looped each extra warp

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separately and was then tied to form a bundle under the warps. This completed the preparation.

In order to weave the ground weave under the extra warp, the secondary heddle was used to pull the threads up above the main warp, then the wooden sword slid between the two warps behind the main heddle (see picture below). This held the supplementary warp at the top of the shed while several rows of the ground weave were completed. The sword was then withdrawn, the other secondary heddle used to pull the extra warps down below the main warp, the sword slid between the two sets again to hold it in place, then rows of plain weave completed above the supplementary warp. In the finished cloth the extra warps thus floated along the face of the strip, passing through the ground weave to the other face every few rows.



Figure 26: Supplementary warp float weaving in Èkẹjọ compound, Extra string heddles used to manipulate the yellow and blue supplementary warp, which is held in place using the shed stick.

Obviously this method of weaving was extremely slow - Kazeem was completing just two 90 inch strips per day at first, although with practice he pushed this up to 8 or 9 strips. A second, slightly faster method, modifying the first, was tried by some of the weavers in Èkẹjọ compound a few months later.

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In this arrangement the extra heddle holding the supplementary warps from above was dispensed with. A small stick was inserted above the supplementary warp but below the main warp. When this stick was pushed back to the cloth beam the extra warp crossed the centre of the shed, allowing the ground weave to be woven below it, but when it was slid forward against the heddles it held the supplementary warps down allowing weaving to take place above them. A secondary string heddle was still placed around the groups of extra warps from below but was rarely needed. This proved to be significantly faster and was adopted by Nurudeen and several of the other senior weavers, although Kazeem and many of the younger weavers persisted with the first method. By May 1997 however, when I visited Ỗyộ again, all the weavers in the compound had switched to this second technique.

The weavers thus drew on the familiar, on the knowledge of techniques of weft float weaving handed on to them, but selected from and adapted aspects from this inheritance in a creative response to changing requirements. This change, as far as the compound was concerned, was externally initiated in the form of an order for a new type of cloth, accompanied by a sample of the design. The master weavers and senior weavers collaborated to study the sample and work out from the cloth itself how the desired effect could be achieved. They were almost certainly the first weavers in Ỗyộ to weave supplementary warp float designs and several other Ỗyộ master weavers were among the numerous people who stopped to watch Kazeem weave the first order. If the design first woven was not created by them, their response to it was itself a creative reworking and extension of their technical repertoire, which they continued to subject to further modifications and adaptations as their experience of warp float weaving grew with subsequent orders over the following months.



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In fact the solutions developed within Èkẹjọ to the technical problems posed by warp float weaving were different from those pursued by most of the other Yorùbá weavers who adopted the technique, particularly in Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ilorin. There is a third, even simpler and faster method which is to leave the extra warp in place in the centre of the shed and simply weave sections passing the shuttle above it, then sections with the shuttle passing below. With practice the weaver soon learns to throw the shuttle through the small gap without it tangling with the extra warps. This is the method used by Ewe weavers (see Figure 13, page 70 ), assisted by the fact that they use a longer slimmer shuttle than that characteristic of Yorùbá weaving<sup>16</sup>.

Of course there is more to becoming a weaver than simply mastering a set of technical procedures. The trainee absorbs through long familiarity and participation the dispositions, bodily postures, ways of thinking and behaving, not just of weaving, but also of her or his wider participation in society, in short the *habitus*<sup>17</sup> of the time and place. In part this will involve continuities with the past, in part an adaptation and response to the inevitable changing circumstances. Thus as a weaver moves through the various roles from childhood, apprenticeship, dependent to master weaver, to retirement there will be both continuities with and changes from the activities and responsibilities of previous occupants of the same role. The role of Alhaji Moshood as a master weaver, aspects of which we will outline below, differs in many details from that of his father Alhaji Fasasi 30 or so years ago, and if as he anticipates he is eventually succeeded by his son Kazeem, he too will face changes and new challenges.

Not all weavers will go on to become master weavers. Those that do however will have worked closely with their own master as he hands on to them his ways of behaving and proceeding as he goes about his business. Once

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again we can only outline the most tangible aspects of these here, which we will consider under the following headings:

### **Relations with customers and the sale of cloth:**

We have noted how the introduction of supplementary warp float weaving to Èkẹjọ compound was initiated by an order placed with one of the master weavers. This is not unusual in itself since the business of the weavers is largely order driven. Customers for the master weavers may be broadly divided into direct purchasers and traders buying for resale. The direct purchasers and the circumstances in which *aşo òkè* is used will be looked at in more detail in chapter six on the consumption of cloth, while the role of traders will be examined in chapter five on cloth marketing. However some comments are necessary here. Direct purchasers were largely *Ọyọ* people who had some family celebration planned and wished to buy new cloth for it. Some of these purchases were from members of the numerous social clubs or *ẹgbẹ* in the town, but demand from these clubs was not the dominant factor that Bascom's data suggests it was during the 1950s<sup>18</sup>. Other orders came from personal contacts made by one or other of the master weavers, or passed on to them by friends or compound members living in *Ìbàdàn* or Lagos.

Some of these personal contacts stretched back over many years, with the customer returning whenever a need for new *aşo òkè* arose in her family. The customer would normally come to Èkẹjọ compound in person to discuss the order, look at the designs being woven, and at samples of recent designs. Often she would be given a selection of small sample pieces to take home and show to other family members. Once she decided on a particular cloth and the amount needed, she would be required to pay a deposit of between 50 and 75 percent of the final price of the cloth, which was used by the master weaver to

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pay for the raw materials needed<sup>19</sup>. In these circumstances it is vital that the customer can trust the weaver, and that he is able to establish a reputation for delivering cloth of the appropriate quality at the time agreed. Aşo òkè is a crucial element in ceremonies such as weddings, and may be ordered up to six months in advance to ensure that there is plenty of time to resolve any dispute that might arise. Few customers have sufficient money to place another order elsewhere or buy cloth at the market if the first weaver over commits himself or otherwise lets them down. Customers repeatedly stress, using the English word “disappoint”, that the weaver must not fail to fulfill his agreement. Sometimes they invite the weaver to the ceremony in the hope of adding to the incentive to have the cloth ready on time. It is to a large degree by establishing a reputation for reliability that the master weavers in Èkejò compound have been able to sustain a substantial turnover of business without having much capital. A secondary source of direct orders is private individuals who meet the two master weavers at either of the two big cloth markets they attend regularly, Aráòmí market in Òyó or the market in Èdè.

Broadly similar conditions apply to business that is placed with them by professional aşo òkè traders, most of whom meet with the master weavers at the cloth markets rather than coming to see them at the compound. They will place their orders at one market, and collect the completed cloth at an arranged date in a subsequent market. Although traders are given a slightly lower price, they are required to pay a similar deposit to the weavers. Once again the weavers rely on an established network of trader customers for whom they have worked over a number of years and who trust them to deliver in terms of both quality and timely completion of orders. The master weavers, or occasionally one of the older dependent weavers, would regularly travel in order to personally deliver cloth to traders or major private customers living in Lagos, Ìbàdàn or other cities.

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Aşo òkè is sold in two standard units. As we have seen it is woven in long strips, which are subsequently cut up into standard lengths which should be 90 inches long<sup>20</sup>. These strips are then tied up into bundles containing enough cloth for either just the two pieces of cloth worn by most women today, the *ipèlè* and *gèlè*, used with other garments of imported material, or for the complete women's outfit of four pieces of cloth. The established number of 90 inch strips needed for these is 17 of four inch width for the *ipèlè* and *gèlè*, and 39 for the entire outfit, an amount universally referred to as a "complete". This "complete" forms the basic unit for weaving on which prices are calculated and weavers paid. It is based on the women's garment because far more women wear full outfits of aşo òkè, and because the quantity required for a man's outfit depends on the style of the robe. A figure of 32 four inch strips is widely quoted. With the recent introduction of wider strips these standard numbers were undergoing considerable disruption. The developing practice was to sell 10 five and a half inch strips for the *ipèlè* and *gèlè*, and 25 if a complete was ordered, although these give significantly less cloth. Traders or customers who knew their business would insist on more, although the price charged to some extent reflected this.

When they could afford it the master weavers at Èkẹjọ would weave additional sets of cloth in order to build up a stock. Some of this cloth would be taken to the regular markets in the hope of attracting an impulse buyer, and it would be shown to direct purchasers who turned up at the compound. However they did not really expect to sell much of this cloth on a regular basis and it was more of a method of investing their occasional capital surpluses than a major part of day to day business. Neither Alhaji Rasak or Alhaji Moshood was able to accumulate stock of more than about ten to twenty completes during the research period. At least in the case of Alhaji Moshood it would appear that his low level of capital was the result of a strategy of investing in

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alternative assets and sources of prestige rather than of lack of business. He had completed the Haj for a second time in 1995, an expensive proposition in Nigeria despite government subsidies, and was building his second concrete house elsewhere in Òyó. In June 1995 he commented that the expense of the Haj had left him short of capital to buy thread. This blending of business and personal funds seemed to be universal among master weavers interviewed and is probably typical of Nigerian small scale enterprises more generally (Aronson 1978:95). Alhaji Rasak, with a far smaller number of weavers, was noticeably less prosperous.

### **Purchase of raw materials**

As we have noted the purchase of raw materials was largely funded out of the advances received from customers placing orders. There are three stalls in the main Òyó market, Àkẹsán, which stock limited quantities of cotton thread and lurex. Since their prices are relatively high weavers only use these as a source for small purchases in an emergency. An alternative was to try to buy thread from another master weaver who had a temporary surplus. There are no shops selling thread and other supplies for weavers in Òyó, although some of these exist in the larger weaving centres of Ìsẹyìn and Ìlọrín. However the main source of supply for weavers in Òyó was the numerous specialist traders who attend the Aráḍomí cloth market held in the town every 17th day. Weavers such as Alhaji Moshood who also attend Eḍe market regularly could buy there as well. Alternatively there are a number of wholesale dealers operating full-time in Ìbàdàn, although the travel expenses would add 80 to 100 naira to the cost.

One of the most persistent sources of dissatisfaction cited by almost all the master weavers interviewed is the high prices charged for, and the intermittent

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supply of, all types of thread. With the exception of lurex which is imported from Japan, all the thread is manufactured in Nigeria, mostly in Lagos and Kano. Among the main suppliers of cotton are ATM of Lagos (cheaper brands but available in red, white, and black only) and Agata Tex of Kano, which has a wide range of colours at higher prices, while most of the 'silk' comes from a company called Hafrayon in Kano. All of these firms operate through lists of recognized distributors, who they require to make a substantial deposit and provide bank guarantees. This effectively excludes weavers from bypassing the middlemen and buying direct from the factory<sup>21</sup>. A frequent problem arises when weavers are given orders from samples of cloth woven a few months before and the exact shade of thread is no longer available. The factories are also frequently wrong footed by the sudden rises in demand for particularly fashionable colours, fuchsia cotton being a noticeable recent example. This can lead to rapid and unpredictable price fluctuations as wholesalers try to profit from these temporary shortages. Similar problems occur in the case of imported lurex, In addition to the imports organized by wholesalers large quantities of Japanese-made lurex are brought back to Nigeria by weavers and other businessmen returning from the Haj in Saudi Arabia. Prices consequently fall sharply in the month or so after the Haj, while weavers try to off load their surplus lurex and free up capital by hawking it around the cloth markets. For the remainder of the year however, while prices of the silver and gold varieties remain fairly stable, the less commonly used colours such as purple and red are liable to fluctuate sharply making pricing of cloth orders difficult. The best brand of lurex is called Nakatex, but apparently less scrupulous dealers are prone to substitute lesser brands in Nakatex boxes.

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### The pricing of cloth and the remuneration of weavers

The master weavers at Èkejó assess their costs, and consequently their sale prices, in terms of raw materials purchased, labour costs, and a residual profit for themselves. Since the cost of replacing capital equipment is minimal and no rent is paid for family land in the compound, no significant cost factors are omitted by this method<sup>22</sup>. The figures reproduced below provide a breakdown of the cost of four samples as detailed by Alhaji Rasak. All figures refer to one “complete”, All designs are illustrated in Appendix A.

Sample P215	Thread count	Units needed	Cost in Naira
Warp: Purple lurex	130	4.5 rolls	1,575
Yellow cotton	60	1.5 cones*	825
Black cotton	20	4 knots	
Weft: Black cotton		20 knots	
		=1 igan	760
Payment to weaver			300
Payment for warping			30
Sundries (winding cotton etc.)			20
Profit to Master Weaver			490
<b>Selling Price</b>			<b>4,000</b>

\* in this case the yellow thread was cotton from a cone-shaped roll prepared for industrial use.

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Sample P143	Thread count	Units needed	Cost in naira
Warp: Gold lurex	126	4 rolls	1,120
Black mirai		2 cones	1,100
Yellow mirai		1 cones	550
Red mirai		1 cones	550
Orange mirai		1 cones	550
White mirai		1 cone	550
Weft: Black cotton		18 knots	570
Payment to weaver			500
Warping			40
Warp bobbins			60
Weft bobbins			20
Profit to Master Weaver			390
Selling Price			6,000

**Note** 1. The higher payment to the weaver reflects the longer time needed to weave this supplementary warp float design. 2. Only 18 knots of cotton are needed for the weft since the higher warp density allows less weft to be used.

Sample P228	Thread count	Units needed	Cost in Naira
Warp:Red Silk	90	1 bundle	1,800
'Butter' silk	60	1/2 bundle	900
Weft:Red cotton		20 knots	600
Payment to weaver			300
Rolling silk on warp bobbins (20 x 3)			60
Winding weft bobbins			20
Warping			40
Profit to Master weaver			780



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<b>Sample P203</b>	<b>Thread Count</b>	<b>Units needed</b>	<b>Cost in naira</b>
Warp: blue lurex	45	1.5 rolls	450
Green lurex	45	1.5 rolls	450
Black cotton	20	4 knots	
Weft: black cotton		20 knots	760
Payment to weaver			200
Warping			30
Warp bobbins			40
Weft bobbins			20
Profit to Master Weaver			250
<b>Selling price</b>			<b>2,200</b>

There are several comments to be made on these figures. Firstly the selling prices are approximate and something of an opening gambit, which may be reduced depending on factors such as the relationship with the buyer, the weaver's assessment of how much other business he has, etc. Secondly, none of the payments for weaving or other labour need be made in the case of apprentices, so the cost to the master weaver is substantially reduced. For this reason some master weavers insist that all their apprentices leave once they become free but trainees who are compound members are of course entitled to remain. In the case of Èkẹjọ compound a large order will be spread between apprentices and qualified weavers, cutting the overall cost.

The master weaver will calculate these costings in advance on the basis of his knowledge of how many threads of the standard length laid out for one complete will be provided by each unit of the various thread types, jotting down the results on a scrap of paper. Most master weavers have pocket calculators they use for adding up large orders. The above calculations assume a small amount of cloth, usually about one 90 inch strip, will be left over once the weaver has produced the 39 for the complete. It is standard practice, in Èkẹjọ and elsewhere, for the weaver to keep this strip, whether he or she is an apprentice or a free weaver. They can be sold to tailors to make caps (the

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standard types of men's cap are made from a single strip of cloth), sometimes to dealers who buy up the strips for resale at the big cloth markets, or kept for personal use. Many weavers wear long, baggy shorts made from a patchwork of these extra strips<sup>23</sup>.

Dependent weavers, then, receive a payment that is based on the complexity of the weaving and hence on the time taken to weave a complete, that in Èkẹjọ compound ranged from N200 to N500 (US\$ 2.25 - 5.70). If they undertook the various preparatory stages themselves they would also receive small additional payments for these. Some would leave the preparation to the trainees and apprentices, preferring to spend all their time weaving. When they had not been given work to do by their own master, Alhaji Moshood, the dependent weavers in Èkẹjọ were free to take on weaving from other master weavers. Firstly, they all wove cloth regularly for Alhaji Rasak, supplementing the work done by his own small labour force. It was therefore common to see the same order being distributed amongst both Alhaji Rasak's trainees, and the dependent weavers of Alhaji Moshood. Secondly, they often received thread to weave from three other master weavers unrelated to Èkẹjọ compound. Rasheed Tafa, in his mid-forties and a close friend of Alhaji Moshood is from the neighbouring Èkẹsán compound, but for the last 25 years has run a small group of weavers in front of a house he has built further down the road in Ògbún compound. He had only three young apprentices so frequently required extra weavers to fulfill his orders. The other two, Kameel Agbaje and Rafiu Suraju, were younger men, in their mid-twenties who were building up quite large businesses using numbers of dependent weavers spread around Òyó. They mostly gave work to Nurudeen Ademola, who was a close friend, and to his brothers. All of these men would bring the prepared warp bundle to the weaver, together with the thread he would need for the weft, and a sample of the design to be woven. They paid the weaver in advance the agreed fee<sup>24</sup>.

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They would then stop by each day to check on progress and chat with the weavers working for them. The approval of their former master was necessary before a weaver could begin to take on this type of work, although if it was withheld unreasonably he would be free to relocate to his mother's compound or elsewhere.

### **Work patterns and the allocation of time**

The master weaver is also responsible for overseeing the work patterns of his weavers to ensure he has sufficient labour to complete his orders in a timely fashion, taking into account any peaks and troughs in demand. When Jennifer Bray did her statistical survey of work patterns amongst Ẹsẹ̀yìn weavers in the mid-1960s (1966:110), she found that shifts in demand related to farmers' incomes from the agricultural cycle were a significant factor accounting for variation in the production of cloth over the course of the year. This was far less apparent in Ọ̀yọ́ today, probably because farming incomes in general and that of cocoa growers in particular, have been severely squeezed under the Structural Adjustment Programme and its successors. Although farming remains the most important male occupation in Ọ̀yọ́ and most other Yoruba towns, farmers are far less significant as cloth patrons, with most important orders coming from the urban elites of Lagos and Ẫ̀bàdàn. There is a seasonal pattern of demand from these patrons related to the major Christian and Moslem festivals, and a concentration of marriages in particular in the period leading up to Christmas. Nevertheless, there is a natural spread of other events for which aṣọ òkè is required over the course of the year, and although a few clearly slack weeks were apparent after Christmas, there was otherwise no dominant seasonal pattern to demand.

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There is however an important seasonal factor that continues to impact the supply of cloth, namely the interruption of weaving during the rainy season. The rainy season in the Ọyọ area lasts generally from about late April to October, with a brief break in July or August. Since the warp threads are stretched out from the covered looms into the open air it is not possible to weave when it is raining. However for much of the season the rain falls in quite brief but intense outbursts that are rapidly followed by sunshine. Since it takes only a few minutes to set up or dismantle the cloth from the loom, and most of the weavers live in or near the compound, they are able to resume working quickly once the weather permits. It is therefore comparatively unusual for whole days to be lost. Over the course of the 1995 rainy season, which started unusually late, the Èkẹjọ weavers were able to work an average of about five hours a day.

On a normal day when there was no particular pressure to complete an urgent order, the weavers at Èkẹjọ would turn up at their looms one by one between about 8.45 and 10 am. There they would chat with friends, receive instructions from their master weaver, and begin to set up their looms in a fairly leisurely fashion over about half an hour or so. They would have breakfasted on *gàrí*, dried ground cassava eaten with cold water and sugar, before leaving their house. They would weave more or less continuously until about one pm, although they were free to stop and talk to passersby, buy snacks such as roast groundnuts from women or young girls who wandered around the compounds with their wares, or generally respond to whatever occasional distraction offered itself. When they wanted lunch they would send one of the younger apprentices with a tin bowl to one of the nearby cooked food stalls where a portion of boiled rice, *ẹbà*, or *àmàlà*, with a small scoop of 'soup' could be bought for N5. Sometimes the master weaver would pay for this, at others the weavers bought it themselves. The food was usually eaten

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seated at the loom and weaving quickly resumed. They then worked on until about 5.30 - 6.30 pm, with dependent weavers tending to put in longer hours than the apprentices. There were a few light bulbs suspended in the sheds, so it was possible to continue weaving after dusk (about 7 pm) if necessary. Far more often though almost all the weavers stopped working at about 3 pm and went off to watch a football match at the local stadium<sup>25</sup>. In a full day the more senior weavers would produce about fifteen to eighteen 90 inch strips of cloth, while the better trainees wove twelve to fifteen. Thus it took a dependent weaver about two and a half days to finish one "complete" of 39 strips of plain weave cloth. As we have noted some of the trainees went to school on a more or less regular basis. These would start work after school at about 1.30 pm, and work full days at weekends.

In principle the weavers worked a seven day week, apart from one apprentice who never worked on a Sunday, although like all the other weavers at Èkẹjọ she is a Muslim. Not much was done on Friday afternoons, when the two Alhajis went to the mosque. Four or five weavers would accompany the master weavers to the cloth market at Aráòmí on market days. No work was done on public holidays, which in Nigeria include all the Muslim and Christian festivals. They also had a day off whenever there was some public ceremony to watch, such as the culmination of the annual *Egúngún* masquerade festival, or a title ceremony at the palace. Family celebrations, such as weddings, funerals, or naming ceremonies in which members of the compound were involved were also marked by between one and three days off work. Finally, during Ramadan, which in 1996 coincided with the slack post-Christmas period, few of the weavers worked, and those that did finished each day around 2 pm.

Sickness also had a notable impact on number of days worked, with regularly recurring bouts of malaria in particular keeping weavers away. Others would be away for days or weeks at a time visiting family in Ìbàdàn or

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Lagos. In general, both at Ilé Èkẹjọ and elsewhere, it wasn't possible to make a workable distinction between full-time and part-time weavers. Some people clearly wove a lot more than others, and school attendance in the case of children, and farming in the case of some adults<sup>26</sup>, was obviously a significant factor in this. However other matters of both supply and demand intervened in a continuum between those who occasionally wove for a few hours to others who wove daily from dawn to dusk. Weavers weave to make money and did so as often as they could, subject to other demands on their limited capital, and alternative money making opportunities. It is true that some Òyọ weavers do generally only work in the evening after they return from their farms, (most of these were from the Ìsàlẹ-Òyọ district,) but even these men would drastically alter their work allocation depending on the ebb and flow of cloth orders and the demands of the farming season.

The master weaver, then, tries to deploy the labour available to him to meet the orders he has secured and to weave any additional cloth he can afford to produce. He has considerable flexibility despite the constraints imposed by the various time factors noted above. The dependent weavers are paid on a piecework basis, and when he has little work to be done they must look elsewhere or remain idle. Apprentices and trainees are not paid anyway, and if there is no weaving or other related work for them they can be sent on errands or to work for a few days on the farm of another compound member. On the other hand when the master weaver has too much work for his regular workers to complete on time he may simply take some thread to be woven by additional dependent weavers elsewhere.

### Women's Work

In the account of weaving in Èkẹjọ compound in the 1990s there has been little said about any contribution of women to the weaving enterprise. At

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present this contribution is predominantly an indirect one, through their role in sustaining the life of the compound, both on a daily basis through the purchase and preparation of foodstuffs, and other essential work in maintaining households, and over the longer term through the nurturing of the children who will form the next generation of weavers. As in all Yorùbá families exogamous marriages and virilocal residence are the norm, that is to say, young women will leave the compound following their marriage into other predominantly patrilineal<sup>28</sup> families, while women from other families will move into the compound to join their husbands there. In practice however a number of widowed or divorced women had returned to live in their natal compound, while other former residents were very frequent visitors. Women are a constant presence in Ilé Èkẹjọ as in all Yorùbá compounds but they are pursuing a variety of independent economic enterprises of their own. None of the compound women were weaving in 1995-96, although Alhaji Rasak insisted that all daughters of the compound did in fact know how to weave. When a few of the younger women were persuaded to demonstrate this they were clearly slow and unpracticed. None of the numerous girls living in the compound at the time of the research was learning how to weave, and the three female apprentices all came from other compounds on formal apprenticeships.

This marginal role for women in the weaving business at Ilé Èkẹjọ reflects an ongoing process of change in the gender basis of the division of labour over time. This has seen the role of women in weaving decline through the 1950s and 1960s as ready-dyed machine-spun thread replaced locally grown hand-spun cotton dyed in the compound. It is easy now to lose sight of the sheer scale of the contribution that was required from women to spin and dye sufficient quantities of thread by hand to sustain a sizable compound of weavers in the past. In 1950 Bascom recorded that while Malába compound in Òyọ had “over a dozen weavers at their looms”, less than half the number in

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Èkejò today, “there were also about twenty wives and twenty daughters engaged in spinning, and about the same number of dyers” (Bascom and Boyer n.d.:14). Although Èkejò was never a large scale specialist dying compound, there were three women dyers who had married into the compound and were able to oversee the dyeing of whatever thread the weavers required. These included the grandmother of Alhaji Moshood, and the maternal grandmother of Alhaji Rasak. The last of these women (identified as *Ìyá Aláró* - literally mother of indigo dye - in the family tree in Appendix B) died many years ago, and although they trained younger women at the time, none of these found sufficient work to carry on the profession.

As we will see however, in the 1990s there has been a large scale movement of young women into the weaving of *aşò òkè*. The early impact of this on Ilé Èkejò is the presence of the three female apprentices. Suliat Moshood, who completed her three year training period in early 1996, was the first they had ever taken on. It seems likely that the direct involvement of women, including family members, will once again increase over the next few years, as it has done elsewhere in Òyò and beyond.

### The compound and its context

If we return to the proverb with which this chapter began *Ilé ni aláşò ní jókòó tí òkúùkú ní wọ tó o*, “the weaver sits at home and the sledge is drawn towards him,” the importance of the compound where the weaver works, drawing the weighted sledge towards him as he weaves more and more cloth, is highlighted. The compound is the key site where the evolving tradition of *aşò òkè* weaving is developed and transmitted. Yet we also need to look beyond the compound, as the weaver must in fact do for the raw materials, customers, and so many other aspects of his art. Although the demolition of the



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old compound walls over the last fifty or so years may be taken as symbolic of a greater opening up of a secluded family space to the wider world in the face of *òlájú*, “civilisation”, *aşò òkè* weaving has always been a craft thoroughly immersed in the wider contexts of changing life in Yorùbá cities and towns from its origins in long distance trade to its present reliance on Japanese lurex. The consideration of certain facets of the wider context within which Ilé Èkẹjọ Adẹsínà compound operates today will take in the situation of other weavers in Òyọ in the 1990s, the links both formal and informal between Ilé Èkẹjọ and these other weavers, and a brief look at *aşò òkè* weaving in the other major weaving towns. Finally a temporal perspective will be added by an examination of the changes within the internal organization of weaving compounds over time. Other facets of the whole will be viewed later in the thesis when we turn in subsequent chapters to women as weavers and to the marketing and consumption of *aşò òkè*.

#### **Aşò òkè weaving in Òyọ.**

After an extensive survey<sup>29</sup> the total number of people currently engaged in the weaving industry in Òyọ was estimated to be about 1000, with slightly more than 750 looms in use in early 1996. Of these weavers about 100, or ten percent, were women or girls.

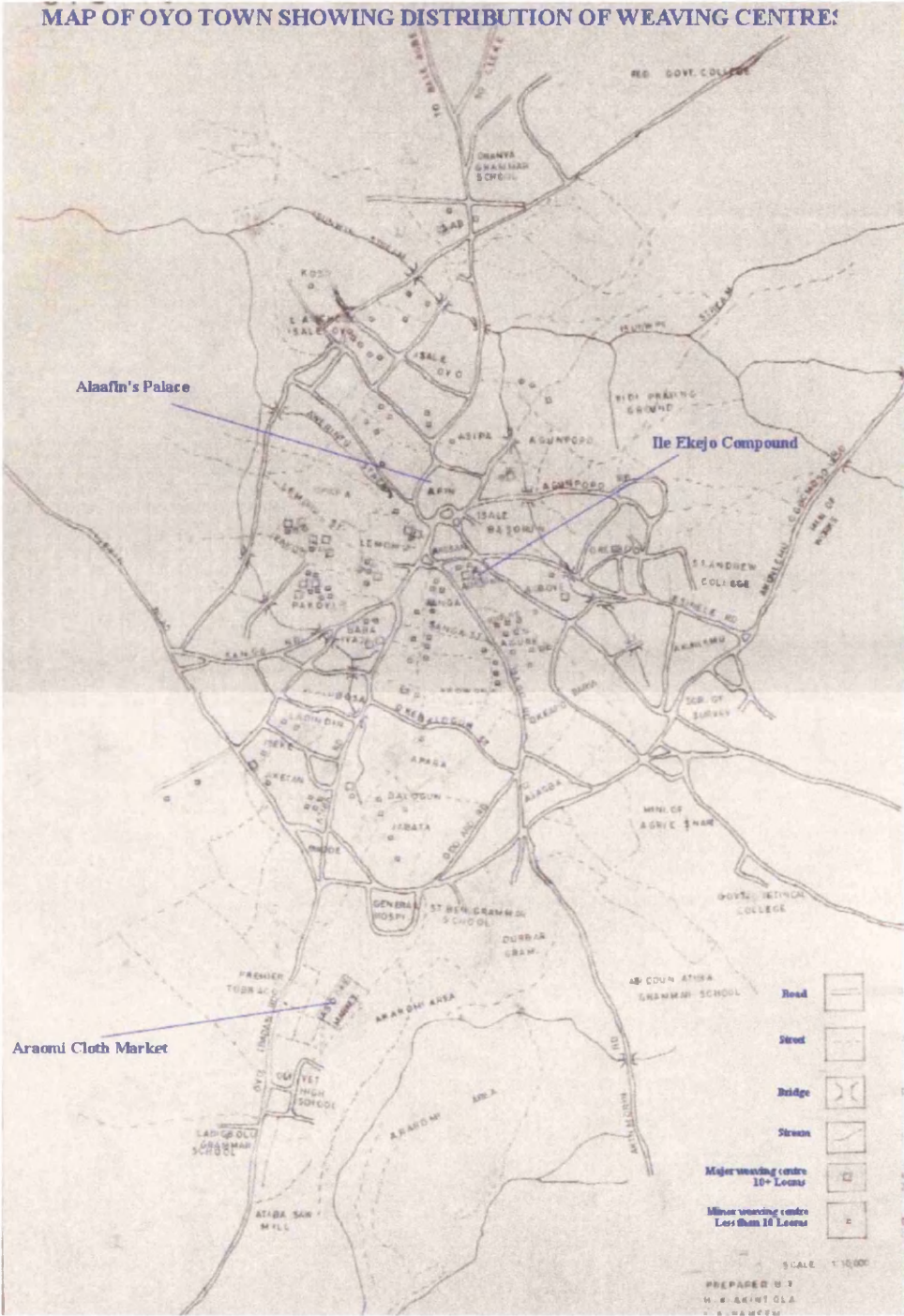
As will be clear from the map there are weavers working in every district of Òyọ Town, but their distribution is far from even. Of the twenty sites where there are ten or more looms, eleven are in two quarters, Pàkòyí and Lẹmómù. These are areas associated with the early presence of Islam in the re-established town of Òyọ in the 1830s. We have already mentioned the role played by the Pàràkòyí as an early supporter of Islam, while Lẹmómù, as its name suggests, is the site of the Central Mosque and the family from which the Iman is drawn (Lẹmómù is a contraction of *Ilẹ́ imam*, ie the house of the iman.)

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Other major weaving compounds are in old districts associated with senior chiefs: Adéşínà (the Àrẹ̀mọ̀), Balógun, and Bàbá Iyajì. Two of the larger weaving groups were established by their current master weavers, one of whom, Alhaji Ayantunji, was taught by Alhaji Fasasi in Èkẹjọ compound, while the other learnt to weave in Lẹ̀mómù. Ilé Èkẹjọ is the compound with the second largest number of weavers. The largest group of weavers in Òyọ are at Kaa kuta Eléşin compound, in Pàkòyí district, which has about fifty looms in operation, with seventy weavers and trainees, including apprentices. Although there are a number of elderly men weaving in this compound who are nominally regarded as master weavers, most of the marketing of cloth and other business aspects of the work is managed as a single unit by one master. Alhaji Asikolaye, who does not weave himself, travels regularly to maintain his contacts with the traders and customers in Lagos. Although he no longer attends any of the major cloth markets, preferring to deal in person at the traders premises, Alhaji Moshood of Èkẹjọ compound acknowledges that it was Alhaji Asikolaye that taught him the skills of cloth marketing at Òjé market in Ìbàdàn after his own father died.

The smaller centres are more mixed. Some are compounds where the master weaver formerly ran a much larger group but is now in semi-retirement, others were well-established family groups of five or six weavers under a single master, others were run by younger weavers in the process of building up to a bigger group. Similarly some of the weavers working alone were old men who were virtually retired, others were recently qualified apprentices working mostly as dependent weavers. Although Eléşin compound is the largest group of weavers in Òyọ, it is not the one regarded as the most successful by the weavers. Instead they would refer to one of the other substantial groups, with only about twenty weavers. The master weaver in charge of this group, Alhaji Isiaka<sup>30</sup>, was universally considered to be the

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wealthiest Ọyọ weaver, with the trappings of his success including a two storey concrete house, a modest car, and a substantial stock of cloth. Although there are a range of business and interpersonal skills that contribute to success as a master weaver, the key, as explained by Alhaji Isiaka himself<sup>31</sup> was to have access to starting capital and then to be disciplined in keeping capital employed in the business. This is important firstly because it is weavers who are short of money that are likely to disappoint customers when the deposit paid on an order is insufficient for the weaving materials or is even spent on something else. A reputation for reliability is crucial in a business dependent on cash advances and trust between customers and weavers. Secondly, if a weaver has capital he can invest it in building a stock of cloth, which will both serve as a source for meeting urgent orders and as a store of wealth. As the Alhaji stressed, by investing his money in cloth he was deliberately restraining his ability to withdraw his capital for other expenditure "If it were to be in cash and you save it in the bank, you can spend it at anytime."

Of course a reputation for success and reliability is itself a major factor in sustaining continued success since it reassures the important wholesale traders from Lagos who are crucial to large-scale sales. In turn regular business with these traders ensures a weaver is working with some of the latest designs and attracts private customers looking for fashionable cloth. It also serves to attract a regular flow of apprentices - apart from one of his sons all of the Alhaji's weavers were apprentices, many of them young women, some sent by their parents from other towns. All apprentices were obliged to leave to set up on their own once they became free<sup>32</sup>, so they remained available to take on work if required but the core business was done by unpaid apprentice weavers. The Alhaji then, has access to a large pool of former apprentices when he has a larger order than can be woven by his current apprentices. He would use this workforce to build up his stock by weaving several extra sets of cloth along

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Figure 27: The senior Oyo weaver Mr Sanni Adeniyi displays some of the older pieces from his collection of samples kept to show to potential customers. On his lap is a design incorporating an elephant pattern in supplementary weft float.

with each order. For example, when a customer placed an order for ten “completes” he would have his weavers produce twelve. Apart from covering him against unexpected delays or problems with the quality of one of the weaver’s work, and thereby adding to his reputation for prompt, reliable delivery, the extra two sets would automatically convert part of the profit in the order into stock. This seems to be a regular practice among the wealthier master weavers in Iséyìn and Ilorin also.

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However the Alhaji also had another method of building up stock, namely that he would buy finished cloth from a number of other Ọyọ master weavers<sup>33</sup>. He stressed that he would not just buy cloth from anyone who turned up, since he could not be sure that they had obtained it honestly, but that there are some of the Ọyọ master weavers he knows well who regularly bring cloth to sell to him. This included Alhaji Rasak from Èkẹjọ compound. If he did not have any orders of his own Alhaji Rasak would often have one of his weavers produce cloth which he would then take to sell to Alhaji Isiaka. Unlike the occasions when a cloth was specifically ordered it would be Alhaji Rasak who decided what design to produce (usually another “complete” of whatever his weavers had been doing last since he would have already bought thread in the right colours.) He would sell it to Alhaji Isiaka for a profit of N200 or so, compared to the N500 he might make on a customer sale.

In Ọyọ at least this kind of relationship between master weavers is very unusual, if only because none of the others have sufficient capital to buy in cloth. Far more common is the link between weavers in different compound that arises out of the master weavers engaging dependent weavers in other compounds to work for them. We have already seen that a number of the dependent weavers in Ilé Èkẹjọ work regularly on this basis. In general this is a strategy adopted by master weavers who are either unable to attract sufficient apprentices to weave their normal flow of orders, or who receive a larger order than they can complete. However there are a small number of younger master weavers who are establishing themselves as entrepreneurs through a deliberate reliance on out-placement of the orders they receive. One of these, a man in his early thirties who is one of three master weavers active in a large compound in Lẹmómù district, has ten apprentices in his compound but over 20 other weavers regularly working for him at their houses around Ọyọ. He is using the profits from this business to finance his studies at university in Ifẹ. The warp

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would be prepared under his supervision by one of the apprentices in his compound, then the weaver would come to collect the prepared bundle, the thread needed for the weft, and the payment for their work. Payment for plain weave designs was in the range of N200 - N300 per complete. After completing the work the weaver returns the finished cloth to him<sup>34</sup>.

Two other younger men, in their mid twenties, who operated in a similar fashion, were among the main providers of work to the dependent weavers at Ilé Èkẹjọ. One of these, who lived in a rented room away from his compound, had no weavers at his house and so was totally reliant on out-placing. Both were conspicuously better dressed than other weavers of their age and had more of the trappings of success such as video players in their rooms - one owned a motorbike with his name and trade painted on the mud flap "Agbájé Aláşòkè". He told me<sup>35</sup> that his latest tactic for securing more business was to build up a stock of the more complex supplementary warp float designs in the hope that the many Ọyọ weavers who did not want to weave these difficult styles would pass on business to him.

Although many of the master weavers in Ọyọ are now training young women to weave, there is only one female 'master' weaver active in the town. Mrs Ajíbọlá Lawal, a native of the town of Şakí, some 110 kilometres to the northwest of Ọyọ, has been running a small group of weavers since 1979. The four looms she uses are set up by the roadside outside the house where she rents rooms near the Ọyọ hospital. Mrs. Lawal does not come from a weaving family, but she began her own apprenticeship under a male master weaver in her home town of Şakí in 1967. At the start of 1996 she had six female apprentices, but over the years she has trained numerous other young women.

Two key points emerge from even a brief overview of some of the weavers active in Ọyọ town in the mid-1990s. Firstly it is clear that there is no standard pattern of internal organization within weaving groups, although there

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are of course many points of similarity. Although the roles of master weaver, dependent weaver, apprentice etc. are recognized as recurring in many situations, it is not possible to generalize about the specific details of the arrangement of authority within the larger groups. Where several men have a nominal claim to master weaver status within a single compound, they may make a variety of ad hoc arrangements from completely separate businesses to de facto control by a single master, depending on nuances of personality, business acumen, contacts with customers, and numerous other contingencies. Moreover other master weavers may elaborate non-compound based weaving groups, as we have seen, either by establishing a workplace on rented land, or more radically, by relying only on out-placement of all orders. Secondly, there is a network of informal ties linking together many of the weaving compounds. Taking Ilé Èkejó as our example we have seen that these include one leading master weaver who trained at Èkejó, another who himself assisted one of the Èkejó master weavers, and a third to whom an Èkejó master weaver regularly sells cloth. Additionally there is the work placed with dependent weavers within Èkejó by master weavers from outside, plus on occasions work that the Èkejó masters themselves pass out to weavers elsewhere. There are other social ties also: the master weavers meet regularly at the mosques; those who attend cloth markets mostly sit close together at Aráòmí in Òyó and travel together to Èdẹ; they will all be invited whenever a weaver is holding a family ceremony or party. These social ties are often cemented by closer links - for example, the second wife of Alhaji Moshood of Èkejó compound is the daughter of a master weaver in Ìsàlẹ̀ Pàkòyí. Reflecting this pattern of intermixed business and personal ties many master weavers regularly visit each others compounds, and may rely on being able to borrow urgently needed thread or lurex from a nearby weaver in the event of an unanticipated shortage. However the systematic pattern of cross compound<sup>36</sup> ties that existed in the



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past when many weavers were reliant on members of other compounds for regular supplies of dyed thread are no longer apparent.

These informal ties are augmented by a number of formalized organizations to which Ọyọ weavers belong. It is these organized institutions which we will consider now, as they serve in some cases to extend the weaver's links beyond the compound and even the town, to the whole of the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria.

### Weavers' Organizations in Ọyọ Town.

All the master weavers in Ọyọ, with the exception of a few younger men who have yet to establish their business, are members of a society of Ọyọ weavers, called simply Ẹgbé Aláṣòkè. The society is divided into five wards, representing each of the main weaving areas of the town: Ará Ọyọ, Pàkòyí, Lẹmómù, Mòlábà, and Isàlẹ Ọyọ. The last area, where there are a comparatively small number of weavers, most of whom are also farmers or students, only joined the society within the last ten years or so. The master weavers in each ward attend a meeting once a month, where they pay their dues and discuss any outstanding problems. Each ward and the Ọyọ society as a whole has a secretary, a chairman, and a treasurer, all of whom meet at the site of Aráòmí market three days before each market day. The chairman is selected on the basis of seniority rather than of business success, while the secretary is generally a younger man who has the necessary skills of literacy. The ward officials and those for the town society will be invited to any weaver's ceremony, including the freedom ceremonies for apprentices. Despite claims (eg. Lamb 1980:29) to the contrary, the society, like similar ones in other towns, plays no role in regulating prices, quality, conditions of service for apprentices, new designs, or even access to the trade. What it does do is intervene when there are disputes between members or with other weavers or

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purchasers of cloth - some of these disputes of course are over issues such as poor quality cloth supplied in fulfillment of an order<sup>37</sup>. They also support the right of master weavers to confiscate cloth, thread, or even weaving equipment, from other weavers who have defaulted on work for which they have been paid. In such circumstances they will support the master weaver if the defaulter has recourse to the police<sup>38</sup>. Although membership of the society does not seem to be strictly compulsory it is a major forum for achieving status amongst weavers and all the master weavers in Òyó participate. Membership of the society is a precondition for selling cloth at the regular cloth markets, although not all society members choose to take up this right. If there are any issues of wider concern emerging from the local meetings, the chairman of the Òyó society will be asked to raise them with the representatives of weavers from other towns.

The organization of aṣọ òkè weavers is closely related to the system of cloth markets which they have developed over the years. The main organization that brings Òyó weavers together with those from the other major weaving towns is in fact of quite recent origin, being the Òyó branch of a pan-Yorùbá weaving society established in 1992 as the result of disputes over the decision to move the main cloth market from Òjé in Ìbàdàn to Aráḍmí in Òyó. The reasons for this move will be discussed when we consider the history of aṣọ òkè marketing in chapter 5. Since the previous society was based around Òjé market and chaired by an Ìbàdàn weaver, the master weavers of Ìbàdàn naturally refused to accept the move to Òyó and continued to operate the existing, albeit much reduced, association along with the remains of the regular cloth market held every 17 days at Òjé. Òyó weavers supported the move to their home town en masse, as did the majority from Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín. Those weavers who chose to continue at Òjé maintained the existing society, still claiming to represent all aṣọ òkè weavers, although the societies in most major

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weaving towns seemed to have transferred their allegiance to the new body. The new society, called the *Egbé Aláṣọ òkè Ọmọ Ibílẹ̀ Nigeria* (translated by them as Nigeria Native Clothes Weavers and Trading Company), is centred around the market held at *Aráṣẹ̀mí* in *Ọ̀yọ́* on the same day as the market at *Ọ̀jẹ́*.

In addition to the main weaver's society there are currently a few smaller organizations amongst weavers in *Ọ̀yọ́*. A revolving credit society, *èsúsú*, is operated among a number of the master weavers, with payments being collected from them while they are attending *Aráṣẹ̀mí* market<sup>40</sup>. Although there are no weavers' cooperatives as such, credit cooperatives are common in the town and some weavers do belong to these and occasionally obtain loans from them. There are also a small number of associations between groups of master weavers who agree to pool large orders with their fellow members. One of these, which did not hold regular meetings, or even have a society name, grouped together a few of the master weavers in *Ìsàlẹ̀ Pàkòyí* and *Akètàn Títún*, with another from *Ọ̀gbún* compound<sup>41</sup>. A more formal organization, with twenty or so weavers as members, brought together those weavers in *Ọ̀yọ́* who were "strangers" from the Upper *Ọ̀gùn* area of *Ọ̀yọ́* State, ie. the area between *Şakí* and *Ìsẹ̀yìn*. Mrs Lawal, the female weaving proprietor from *Şakí*, was a member of this group, but most of the others were younger men and a few women working alone. They operated a small *èsúsú* at their regular meetings and were headed by a weaver in his thirties who also worked in the administration of the local hospital. At the time of my research they were engaged in a minor dispute with one of the senior *Ọ̀yọ́* master weavers after they had apparently tried to pressure a young woman who was a former apprentice of his into joining the society.

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### Aşo òkè weaving in other towns

If Òyó has played a key role in the history of the aşo òkè industry, and continues to be significant as the site of the major market, it is not the main centre of aşo òkè weaving and has not been so since the fall of Òyó-ilé in the 1830s. By the mid-C19th two other towns, Ìlórín and Ìsẹ̀yìn, had established large weaving communities, absorbing many of the refugees from the old imperial capital. The subsequent history of weaving in these two centres has been well documented (Bray 1966, O'Hear 1984, Olaoye 1993) so we will confine ourselves here to a brief account of the current situation.

Ìlórín has without doubt the largest concentration of aşo òkè weavers in the 1990s, with large numbers<sup>42</sup> at work in long established family compounds in the older part of the city to the west of the Emir's palace, especially in districts such as Òkélèlè, Òkèkèrè, Pàkátà, and Òkè Èbó Àláşo. In contrast to the situation in Òyó it seems to be common for there to be four or five master weavers and fifty or more trainees working in a single compound. Several of the master weavers have shops along the main roads at the edge of their compounds where they sell both aşo òkè and weaving materials. The main weavers' society, which as we have seen, provides the treasurer to the national society, is called Ègbé Tawakalitu. Although Ìlórín is a state capital and on the main road to northern Nigeria it is relatively remote from the main centres of aşo òkè consumption (a further two hours drive northeast from Òyó) so most of the master weavers meet the wholesale traders at Aráòmí or travel to see them in Lagos.

Ìsẹ̀yìn, a smaller town about forty kilometres to the northwest of Òyó, is home to the second largest community of aşo òkè weavers. There are weavers in all areas of the town, but the largest concentrations are in Òkè Olá, Òkè Bàbádúdú, Idíòsà, Kòso, and Ijembà quarters<sup>43</sup>. Once again it seems to be common for there to be several master weavers active within a single

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compound, and for several of the more successful to maintain shops with large stocks of cloth. The main weavers' society in Ìsẹ̀yìn is the Ègbé Aláṣọ-òkè Ìsẹ̀yìn, which in 1996 was still chaired by the same elderly weaver, Alhaji Shittu Gbeko, whose photograph appears in Lamb and Holmes' 1980 book. Since about 1991 the society has owned a building on the Şakí road, which contains several small shops as well as a room used for the monthly meetings<sup>44</sup>. Members pay an initial joining fee, currently 320 naira, then a monthly fee of 5 naira at each meeting. Since November 1993 the society has transferred its allegiance from Òjé market in Ìbàdàn to Aráòmí in Òyó<sup>45</sup>, although a few Ìsẹ̀yìn weavers still make the longer journey to Ìbàdàn.

Both Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín are towns with a long tradition of weaving, owing their present predominance in the trade to movements of population within the heartland of the old Òyó empire in the nineteenth century. Although on a substantially larger scale, the organization of weaving in both of these towns conforms quite closely to the situation in Òyó town itself, as described above.

For the vast majority of weavers the family compound of the master, or his recently built storey house, remains the organizational centre for the craft. As in Òyó there has been a movement into the industry by young women over recent years, with a similar figure of about ten percent of all weavers today being female<sup>46</sup>. The key difference is that in these two centres there are far more of the large groups of weavers like Ilé Èkẹ́jọ́ with whom the major wholesale cloth traders work. Most of these traders only give orders to weavers from Ìsẹ̀yìn or Ìlọ́rín, with a smaller number patronizing the Òyó master weavers mentioned above. As a consequence a number of weavers have been able to build up a far greater volume of trade, and hence a greater wealth that is visible in cars, new houses, and especially in very large stocks of cloth, than is the case in Òyó.

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Figure 28: The wealthy Ìsẹ̀yìn master weaver Alhaji Keganhe displays part of his store of cloth, 1995.

There are also important communities of *aṣọ òkè* weavers at work in Òkè-ihò and nearby towns to the west of Ìsẹ̀yìn, in Ṣakí, Ìbàdàn, and Lagos. Smaller numbers, but in long established compounds, can be found in Abẹ̀òkúta, Ìjẹ̀bu-Òde, Òṣogbo, Ogbómọ̀ṣọ́, Eḍe, and Ifẹ̀. Other small groups, established in the twentieth century, are working in towns such as Ilẹ̀ṣà, Oṇḍó<sup>47</sup>, Adó Èkitì, and Àkúré. In some of these towns there has been a far more marked increase in the number of women weavers than in the older weaving centres discussed above. We will consider this development in the following chapter.

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### **The Compound and the sense of tradition.**

We have noted that the concept of *aşo òkè* weaving as a tradition implies both an active selectivity in the process of handing on from the past, and a creativity that goes beyond selection to explore novel forms, materials, and techniques. We have concentrated in this chapter on the active development of this tradition today, noting both the handing on within the weaver's compound of the various techniques and modes of behavior appropriate to a fully socialized weaver, and the creative adaptation to new demands for changing styles of cloth such as supplementary warp floats. We have not attempted to reconstruct or document the minutiae of all the changes that have inevitably arisen out of the development of the tradition over the course of the last century or so, except in so far as they impinged on our discussion of cloth design in the previous chapter. It should be clear that what is now being handed on by master weavers in the compounds of *Ọyọ*, *Ìlọrin*, *Ìsẹyìn*, and elsewhere, has both large areas of continuity with and substantial differences from what they in turn received from their fathers. We will conclude this chapter with a brief consideration of weavers' perceptions of the more significant of the differences.

The first point to make is that as participants in the process of *aşo òkè* weaving, rather than outside observers burdened with a static concept of traditionality, much of the change that has occurred is simply taken for granted and unremarked, particularly as it has been part of a wider background of rapid change that has transformed so many aspects of life in Nigeria over the last few generations. Having said that however, there are two significant factors that are frequently raised by weavers in response to questions about change, namely the move from handspun to machine spun thread and the increase in the number of patterns woven. Rasheed Tafa<sup>48</sup> explained these changes in an

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interesting way that reemphasizes the importance of the three prestige cloths, *sányán*, *ètù*, and *àlààrí* in weavers' perceptions of the past. In the time of their grandfathers, he said, they wove only the three handspun cloths: *sányán*, *ètù*, and *àlààrí*. In their fathers time they were becoming modern and they wove many different cloths with their own names. In his own time there are so many designs in existence that they do not know their names any more.

It is hardly surprising that the switch to machine-spun thread is the major change recalled by older weavers since it undoubtedly had far reaching effects on all aspects of the weaving process, both within the compound and beyond. As we have seen this was a gradual process extending from the 1930s to the 1950s. The huge number of female household members previously employed in spinning thread and dyeing has already been noted. At a more basic level, the equipment used in preparing warp and weft threads for weaving was modified, with faster and more effective methods of warping using numerous spools of thread which was made possible by the smoother running of the more even thread cut down the time needed to prepare a warp from over a day to one or two hours. Similarly the weaving process itself was speeded up considerably as the new thread moved more easily through the heddles and reed and consequently broke far less often. The pattern of financial ties between weaving husbands and spinning or dyeing wives was altered as thread was bought in the market, while patterns of interdependence between specialized weaving and dyeing compounds came to an end.

The second change, although less marked in its organizational and technical impact, was stressed by almost as many weavers. Although the true pattern is not as marked as Rasheed Tafa's periodisation would suggest, it does seem to be the case that there has been a notable increase in the range of different designs woven. In the 1990s the turnover of designs is extremely rapid. In Ilé Èkẹjọ it was not uncommon for 8 or 10 different designs to



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woven in the compound in a single week, while a total of 315 different designs were recorded in a year (see Appendix A.) Master weavers in their fifties or older generally recall that when they were themselves in training there were only a few designs woven in each compound at a specific time. These designs would be repeated by the weavers for a period of months or even years. As a result a knowledgeable weaver or trader would know at which compounds in the town one would be able to obtain cloths of a particular pattern<sup>49</sup>. Much of this cloth would be woven without a prior order and taken for sale at the market. Traders would tend to place their orders for a particular design with the compounds where it was normally woven, although weavers who saw a design was selling particularly well were quite free to copy it. A contemporary account even claimed “if a man invents a popular pattern, he is glad and proud to see others manufacturing it” (Murray and Hunt Cooke 1938:3), although some of my sources suggest this was not always greeted with such enthusiasm. It is clear from Bascom’s 1951 data that the introduction of a new design was relatively infrequent: although his elderly informant<sup>50</sup> who was the head of Molába compound had seen “hundreds” of new patterns in his compound in his lifetime “one such request had been filled in 1950, and another was currently being discussed in early 1951.” Bascom’s collection of cloth samples in Ọ̀yọ̀ resulted in the assembly of some 350 different patterns over a 3 month period, but this was from a wide range of sources in the town. Today a single visit to the market would supply many thousands of different designs.

If, as many weavers claim, this proliferation of mostly ephemeral designs is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it can be associated with the declining salience of weavers’ pattern names. As recently as the 1960s both weavers and cloth consumers used to name many of the cloth designs in circulation. Today however, although one can still find older weavers who

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will, if adequately prompted, provide names for their current designs, it is no longer normal practice to do so. Although there are numerous records of small numbers of cloth names in the literature, and in the data accompanying museum collections, there is rarely any indication as to whether they were collected from weavers, from cloth traders, or from consumers. The following remarks will therefore be based on the names recorded by William Bascom in 1951, when he assembled a large number of cloth samples from Ọyọ as part of a wider project to collect Yorùbá material culture for the American Museum of Natural History, New York (references will be to the AMNH accession numbers.) In each case Bascom distinguished weavers' names from those he called "club names". These "club names" given to cloth by consumers provide a key source of insights into the concerns involved in aṣọ òkè use, and will be discussed at length in a later chapter (page 328). Weavers' cloth names, unlike those used by consumers, primarily related to the material aspects of the cloth, and were mostly descriptive, either of the cloth itself or of some aspect of its production.

Most weavers' cloth pattern names are composites of between one and four words describing aspects of the cloth. These will be considered first before we look at some of the exceptions. Only two words used refer to the cloth type: *fù/fuhù* is "coarse cloth with minimal pattern" (AMNH accession number 90.1-9748) [cf. Abraham 1958:225 *fùù* - locally woven cloth]; and *kuti* "a coarse cloth" (AMNH 90.1-9755 E) [cf. Abraham 1958:398 *kútùpú* = *kètè*, a type of local cloth.] Far more common are references to the type of thread used. Some of the samples using hand-spun thread are designated *kọkun* (eg. AMNH 90.1-9757 O), while some of the machine-spun thread is *kúre* (AMNH 90.2-193 Z). Other thread terminology is more specific: *elẹpọnkun* is "a naturally tan cotton" (AMNH 90.2-193 Z); *àlààrì* is red imported silk, but often any red thread; and *sányán gidi* "real wild silk" (AMNH 90.2-193 Y).

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*Sányán* without the qualifier referred to the far more frequently used imitations of wild silk, as did the following: *sányán gbìnlérè* (AMNH 90.1-9754 E)[*gbìnlérè* may be translated as “planted in mud”, ie. mud-dyed cotton]; *kàkì ti Yorùbá* (AMNH 90.1-9755 Z) [ie. Yorùbá khaki]; *sányán òyìnbó* (AMNH 90.1-9755 Q) [whiteman’s wild silk]; and *ó nfara wé sányán* (AMNH 90.1-9756 S) [it is comparing itself with wild silk]. The term *sílíkà* refers to imported silk or rayon.

In some cases Bascom’s informants used colour terms<sup>51</sup> in pattern names: *pupa* is an alternative to *àlàárì* for red/magenta; dark blue/black is *aláró* [with indigo] or *dúdú*; *àyìnrín* is medium blue; *òfèfè* light blue; *aligà* dark green; *funfun* white; and *yàrà* (from English) yellow. Where these colour terms were used they generally picked out just one of the colours in the strip, perhaps indicating a modification from a previous design.

Warp stripes are the predominant decorative effect in the cloths collected<sup>52</sup>, so it is perhaps not surprising that there is a considerable vocabulary referring to varying forms. Bascom notes that *yunkun* refers to cloth with all blue warp stripes (AMNH 90.1-9756 Q), *şáflét* to striped cloth (AMNH 90.1-9758 X) [cf. Abraham 1958:706 *sáfèètì* striped cloth], *kugu* to cloth with a white centre stripe (AMNH 90.2-193 Y), and *jankulabẹ* to cloth with broad stripes.

Many of the other names used for stripes draw on metaphorical similarities. Thus a cloth with three stripes may be called *òrẹ mẹta*, three friends (AMNH 90.1-9756 O ), while other words used similarly to refer to stripes include: *onûya*, (mothers - AMNH 90.2-195 C); *olóba*, (kings - AMNH 90.1-9756 L); *abílà/onílà* or *onípélè*, (facial marks - AMNH 90.1-9757 T, 90.1-9764 Y); *olòòpó*, (posts - AMNH 90.1-9757 C ); *alábààgbá*, (plantains - AMNH 90.1-9756 K); *ìwo*, (horns - AMNH 90.1-9756 W); *àbélà*, (candles - AMNH 90.1-9764 P); and *olóbẹ*, (iron rods used for ginning cotton - AMNH

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90.1-9755 B.) Most of these names occur several times in the collection but there does not appear to be any regular correlation between the term used and the width, colour, or specific configuration of stripes. Three samples called *pópó Elèkó*, streets of the King of Lagos, are discussed by Boyer (1983:43) who indicates that Bascom's field notes suggest the streets refer to the narrow pinstripes.

Several terms indicate the use of weft stripes, which are far less frequent in the cloth collected. Nine weft striped samples have weavers's names given that include the phrase *olókò méjì*, with two shuttles, referring to the process of weaving the stripes. The precise referent of the term *onísísán* is less clear. As Bascom's translation "which is tied (ie. has a weft pattern)" indicates, it would also seem to refer to weft stripes but these are present on only three of the five occurrences. One strip with a large check or plaid design is called *onípàkìtí* after a type of coarse mat (AMNH 90.1-9766 A), while two with fine check are called *onídipíní wẹrẹ* (with small pins - AMNH 90.1-9766 J). The term *ojú*, face, would also seem to refer to weft stripes or check. Two of the five samples that have just weft stripes are identified as *olójú nlá* (with a big face), as are two strips with bold check designs.

In a few cases there are weavers's names which refer more generally to an aspect of the context of production. Several cloths of coarse hand-spun thread with muted indigo colour are called *mà jàró gbé*, don't waste dye (eg. AMNH 90.2-190 B), indicating that they were made from thread dyed in an almost exhausted dye solution. In contrast one sample with two very dark indigo warp stripes is designated *pẹ ní ìdí aró*, stay long at the dyers' place (AMNH 90.2-194 G). Finally we can note a multicoloured cloth made from leftover threads called *ma jẹ kí ebí pa mí*, "don't let me go hungry". Saving the leftover threads from commissioned cloths until they had accumulated enough

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to weave is indeed a primary method of revenue raising by apprentice and dependent weavers.

Aside from demonstrating aspects of the wit and verbal dexterity for which the Yorùbá have become known, what can we learn from this brief look at weavers' pattern names. By combining two or three of the above descriptive terms, weavers could convey a limited amount of information about a specific cloth design. Thus *gbìnlérè jankulubẹ aláligà* (AMNH 90.1-9754 L) is imitation wild silk with one or more broad warp stripes including some dark green, while *òrẹ mẹrin ọlókọ méjì* (AMNH 90.1-9764 N) has both weft stripes and four warp stripes. On the evidence available however, the names do not seem to describe the designs with sufficient specificity to refer to a single pattern only. Indeed there are cases where the same name is applied to two or more different cloths, while the same cloth could have several names. None of the names indicating features of cloth design, such as ikat, warp stripes, or weft stripes, are applied consistently to all samples exhibiting that feature.

It would seem that the terminology Bascom collected amounts as much to a descriptive vocabulary utilised by *aṣọ òkè* weavers to a system of cloth names as such. In the context of compound based weaving where, as we have seen, the tendency was for each group to weave a comparatively limited range of designs over a period of months or even years, the terminology was adequately specific to indicate which of the familiar repertoire of patterns was being referred to. The vocabulary picks out the recurring features from which new designs were created by a process of recombination and modification of the existing permutations. It is notable that in quite a large number of cases Bascom's notes indicate that weavers took over the use of names devised by cloth consumers, applying them, where necessary with subsequent descriptive modifications, to those designs which took on a wider popularity of more extended range and duration. Thus the name *ma fówó jẹpà olójú wẹwẹ* (don't

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use money to eat peanuts, with small faces - AMNH 90.1-9766G) is a customer name for a pattern of narrow beige warp stripes interspersed with black and white pinstripes, which has been modified by the addition of narrow weft stripes, indicated by the addition of the weavers qualifier to the name.

Once the pace of design change had become so rapid that almost all designs have become transitory and ephemeral, the ability of these partial descriptions to identify a specific design within a compound of weavers became less effective. Rather than extending the already rather unwieldy terminology to achieve greater specificity, weavers simply extended the use of samples and thread counts they already relied upon to convey more detailed information where necessary. As we have seen, for example, when a master weaver needs to instruct one of his apprentices to prepare a warp, or to tie a prepared warp into the heddles, he will normally show him a sample of the cloth and advise him of the appropriate thread counts. Similarly, in transactions between weavers and cloth traders, samples of the desired designs have long been used, avoiding the ambiguity and possibility of misunderstandings inherent in the limitations of the descriptive vocabulary.

Weavers today who are asked to talk about cloth names generally allude to more general characteristics of types of cloth rather than specific designs. They frequently draw on the different techniques of cloth decoration such as openwork, or materials used such as lurex or silk, to indicate such types as *ɔlɔ̀nà* (weft float), *njawu* (openwork with carried-over threads) or *saini/shinny* (lurex), and if pressed to name a particular cloth will say that this cloth is called *asɔ ɔlɔ̀nà* or whatever. Secondly some of the names for types of fashionable cloth that still circulate widely among cloth consumers may also be drawn on by weavers. The name "Super Q" provides the best recent example of this, while the term *ojútónsɔ̀rò* (the eye that is talking, ie winking) was popular in the late 1980s to describe the effect achieved by the technique of

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plying lurex into the weft. The main context in which weavers actually use these types of names is on business cards. Most master weavers carry business cards that attempt to indicate something of the range of cloths they can produce. Typically these will include the three old prestige cloths, and often one or two names of other old designs - the card of the Ọyọ master weaver Amusat Ayoola, for example, reads “*Fun orisirisi Aso Oke bii: Etu, Sanyan, Oboro, Alari, Petuje, Olokun, Ojutonsoro ati bebe lo*” (“For many different types of *aşo òkè* like: ..... and so on.”) *Pètùje* was a name applied to a number of different and less prestigious variants of *etù*, *òbòrò* means plain or unpatterned, while *Olóòkun* (owner of the sea) was a once popular consumer pattern name. (See Appendix D for a selection of these cards.) The more specific descriptive vocabulary found by Bascom is no longer in regular use and seems to have been largely forgotten by all except a limited number of older weavers. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this vocabulary is the extent to which it was different from that used by cloth consumers. As we will see when we look at consumers’ names in chapter six, in general these indicated an association between *aşo òkè* and the good things in life, drawing on references to money, children and good fortune that indicated a marked divergence from the perspectives and concerns of the specialist cloth producers with technique, design, materials, and production conditions.

### The Mobilization of Labour

If the aspects of the social organization of production that relate to the supply of dyed thread and the process of design innovation are key changes, the general feeling among master weavers was that the main features of their role in organizing production through trainees and dependent weavers had altered little over the years. The four major changes that have had a wide impact on labour mobilization in the Yorùbá region of Nigeria over the last

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hundred or so years, namely the abolition of domestic slavery, the banning of *ìwòfà* 'pawnship', the introduction of wage labour, and the gradual broadening of access to education, all served to reduce the degree of control master weavers could exercise over the labour of junior kin and other dependents. The effect of these however was to a degree counterbalanced by potential master weavers themselves pursuing alternative occupations, as many of those in Èkẹjọ compound have done. If anything there seems to have been a slight tendency towards an increase in the number of weavers working for each master, promoted by the increasing importance of large orders from professional traders<sup>53</sup>. By the 1950s the pattern of training and apprenticeship described above, with much of the form and terminology of apprenticeship borrowed from colonial practice in other industries was already in place<sup>54</sup>. The relationship between master weavers and dependent weavers who had yet to establish their own capital and customer base, was also much as it is today, usually based on piecework payments for each set of cloth woven. This system, called *ọyà*, is supplemented by two others. If the master weaver is particularly confident of the honesty and ability of the weaver he may simply pay him a sum of money, out of which he will buy the necessary thread for the warp and weft, retaining the balance as payment for his work. This variation is called either *alààgbàhun* (Bascom and Boyer nd:19), i.e. "one who takes and weaves", or more commonly today *gbòwógbòwú*, i.e. "takes money and thread". The third method, which is called simply "daily pay", involves a weaver who does not have access to his own loom agreeing to work at a master weavers compound at a set fee for a day's weaving. This is more common in Ilorin than elsewhere. In all these it is the master weaver who selects the design to be woven, exercises a degree of scrutiny over the quality of the work, and retains the profit from the sale of the cloth<sup>55</sup>.



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Although these mechanisms of mobilizing labour as required are essential to the flexibility of master weavers in matching the ebb and flow of orders with a sustainable labour force, we have also seen that in the case of a minority of entrepreneurial weavers they provide a means for bypassing the compound and creating networks that allow a master weaver to dispense with the standard structure. As yet this avenue has not been pursued by sufficient numbers to pose a major challenge to the dominance of the evolving tradition of compound based master weavers. Instead they face a more pressing threat over the next decade from two other sources, namely the ever-increasing influx of young women into *aşo òkè* weaving, and the direct mobilization of weavers by professional cloth traders. It is to these developments that we will turn in the following two chapters.

### Notes

1. This compound was formerly the home of the *Àrẹ̀mọ*, the *Aláàfin*'s eldest son, who was the senior chief of the quarter. This office has however been vacant for some time.
2. Interview: Alfa Amoda, *Ọ̀yọ*, 25/5/1996
3. Abraham (1958:567) notes that there were 15 of the *Aláàfin*'s *Tètù* who acted as sheriff and executioners. At present the compound title of *Èkẹjọ Tètù* has lapsed for several years, but plans are apparently underway to have it taken as soon as the necessary money to meet the expense of the celebration can be raised.
4. *Oríkì* are a complex densely allusive recital of names and events linking the subject to the past of his or her family, compound, and town of origin (see

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Barber 1991 ). The Èkẹjọ compound *oríkì* were recited for us by Alhaja Rali Kareem, 2 April 1996.

5. See Adelowo (1978:86-95). He notes that the first Pàràkòyí in the new Òyó, Yesufu Alanamu, was an influential uncle of Aláàfin Àtìbà who was able to worship in secret during the period of persecution, and afterwards played a role in inviting Muslim scholars to the town.

6. These looms are sometimes referred to in the literature as portable, which seems to risk confusing them with the equipment of itinerant weavers elsewhere in West Africa. As far as I am aware there are no itinerant Yorùbá weavers. The looms are moveable in that if necessary they may be picked up by two people and moved to another site, but this possibility plays no significant part in their actual use.

7. See Berry(1985:155) for a wider account of similar conflicts among Yorùbá entrepreneurs.

8. Output is measured in terms of the standard length of 90 inches for the strips. The main variable affecting quality was the need to beat in the weft with a firm, regular rhythm to produce the desired tight even weave.

9. See Wahab 1995a, for an account of ongoing research into school attendance among weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn.

9. Abraham (1958:288) gives *ìgòṇ aṣọ* as “a length of cloth”, a usage I did not encounter.

10. This “machine” has been in use amongst some Yorùbá weavers since the 1970s. However one still sees the older method of rotating bobbins by hand, mostly but not exclusively confined to old men. The wooden crosspiece holding the threads is replaced by an inverted bamboo cone, usually with a piece of cloth wrapped around it. The bobbin is held on a thin metal rod, at the other end of which is a wooden weight. The rod is rotated rapidly between the fingers and the palm of the hand to draw the thread onto the bobbin. Weavers

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who used this method conceded that it was slower and caused pains in the hand and elbow, but said they were happier with the way they had been taught.

11. The looms in Èkẹjọ compound described here are typical of most looms seen elsewhere. However there are a variety of idiosyncratic loom structures, such as a loom made from old pipes and car parts, in use both in other compounds in Òyó, and in other towns. Note that working parts of the loom used in these various frames remain the same.

12. The weavers used to hold the top of the reed, allowing them to exert a more even pressure, but since it is faster to just hold the side that is what most younger weavers do today. Alhaji Rasak pointed to this as causing a decline in the quality of weaving in recent years.

13. In the past weavers used a kind of ointment called *yanko*, or sometimes coconut oil.

14. See pages 43ff. above for a description of the methods used for these techniques.

15. Although Kazeem was working for Alhaji Moshood who took a close interest in the proceedings, it was Alhaji Rasak who actually set up the loom.

16. After I had seen Ewe weavers in Lagos and Yorùbá weavers in Ìsẹyìn doing this I told Kazeem about it. He and Alhaji Rasak experimented with it, but by that time the weavers were used to the methods they had developed and found it quicker to continue with them than to start afresh learning another new technique.

17. Bourdieu (1977:78) defines *habitus* as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.” He notes (ibid:78) “The schemes of thought and expression he has acquired are the basis for the *intentionless* invention of regulated improvisation.” His emphasis.

18. Bascom and Boyer n.d. pages 7-8.

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19. Lamb (Lamb & Holmes 1980:30) refers to credit being advanced from the weaver to the customer. This is not the case today and was probably rare in the past. Very few weavers have sufficient capital to be in a position to offer credit even if they wished to do so. On the contrary, most require the deposit in order to provide working capital. Customers who need credit are sometimes able to arrange it with a cloth dealer with whom they have a long established relationship.

20. Although 90 inches is the generally accepted length today it is clear from the literature that other lengths were accepted in the past (eg Bray 1966:79). In practice the strips are often cut an inch or two short, and an unwary customer buying cloth at Aráðmí market could find herself with strips of 80 inches or even less. Professional traders always carry a tape measure and are careful to open up bundles of cloth and measure the length.

21. In the mid-1960s weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn formed cooperatives, partly with the intention of buying directly from thread producers (see Bray 1966:103), but these organization were unable to maintain links to the factories and soon lost impetus. Although Ìsẹ̀yìn weavers today discuss similar plans nothing has come of them. Import of thread from outside Nigeria is banned, although numerous other prohibited imports seem to be widely available.

22. See Bray (1966:85) for a detailed estimate of “true” costs, allowing for capital depreciation etc. Here we are concerned with pricing decisions as perceived by the weavers themselves.

23. Bascom (Bascom and Boyer n.d. page 24) noted that in Ọ̀yọ́ in 1950 each weaver was allowed to keep one strip of cloth plus four skeins of dyed thread, which he would accumulate until he had sufficient cotton to weave an entire cloth for sale. The strip of cloth could be sold to the original customer if she or he needed it, to a trader, or retained to make a cloth of multiple designs.

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24. This particular way of distributing work was called *òyà* which Abraham (1958:533) defines as “fee paid to craftsman for his work”. The same term, which also means “cane rat”, was sometimes applied in a slightly derogatory fashion to describe the weavers themselves. There are two other regularly used ways of engaging dependent weavers described on page 157.

25. Local male and female teams play two or three times a week against visitors from nearby towns, attracting large crowds of young people. Work also stopped whenever the national team, the celebrated Olympic-winning Super Eagles, were on television. The weavers shared the leisure interests of other *Òyó* youths, which were dominated by football, but included also Fuji music and videos of Yorùbá ‘popular’ films. Fuji is a kind of Islamic-influenced rap over a drum-dominated backing track, whose leading exponent is currently King Wasiu Ayinde Marshall. Internationally successful footballers and Fuji stars are the main aspirational figures. Kazeem, Alhaji Moshood’s son, was himself an occasional fuji performer under the name “K Wonder”.

26. None of the weavers in *Èkẹjọ* farmed on a regular basis.

27. See Eades 1980:56 and Barber 1991:153 for recent contributions to the debate over the nature of Yorùbá kinship relations.

29. When Bray(1966) carried out her research in *Ìsẹyìn* in the mid-1960s she was able to draw on local government taxation records as a basis on which to assess the total number of weavers in the town. Although the *Òyó* local government was cooperative and helpful they proved unable to locate any comparable records so we were obliged to make our own survey. Nor was a detailed map of the town available. Equipped with a map drafted for us by the town planning department of the local government, and with the assistance of the son of a prominent local weaver, we spent a week walking around *Òyó* searching for weavers and their looms. This was not an easy task since many

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looms are hidden in what seem like mazes of alleys and paths well away from the main tracks. All groups of weavers found were marked on the map, with groups of ten or more looms distinguished by a larger block. As well as the looms known to my assistants we located others by asking local people to help. Once they were sure that we were not policemen or tax inspectors many of them would stop working themselves or call a child to lead us to looms we could never have found otherwise. We then checked the results with the weavers from Èkejó compound and the master weavers gathered at the cloth market. Single looms are being set up frequently by freed apprentices outside their homes, and it is certain that we missed some of these. However I am reasonably confident that all the major groups and the vast majority of the minor ones were located. The approximate location of these was then marked on the final map.

30. Name changed.

31. Interview: Alhaji Isiaka, Òyó, 16/1/96.

32. This was a contrast to weavers who remain based in the home compound, such as Ilé Èkejó, where Alhaji Moshood was more or less obliged to distribute paid work to weavers who were family members or from the next compound whenever it was available. Although Alhaji Isiaka retained certain responsibilities to his former apprentices, and would try to give work to any of them who came to ask him for it, the moral obligation to do so was clearly far less. Since all the weavers in the group were apprentices they were not able to take on outside work for other master weavers, working solely for their own master.

33. This was distinct from his practice of commissioning other master weavers to weave for him when he had a large order, although the same small group of weavers did both.

34. Interview: Abdulrasak Obasekore, Òyó, 28/11/95

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35. Interview: Kameel Agbaje, Òyó, 12/7/96.

36. Bray (1966:64-67) notes the web of interconnections between dyeing and weaving compounds in Ìsẹ̀yìn in the 1960s.

37. The references in the literature to so-called weavers guilds are quite confused. In part this reflects a tendency to extrapolate what was often a particular stage in a complex and local historical process into a pan-Yorùbá picture extending both forwards and backwards in time from the period when the data was gathered. In part also, as with Lamb's account (Lamb & Holmes 1980:29), the use of the term "guild" imports a package of ideas about what medieval European guilds may have done, while failing to distinguish the aspirations introduced by colonial officials when framing the rules for such societies in Nigeria from the far more limited reality of what is actually done. Unraveling all these tangled threads is far from easy, but we will try to at least clarify the picture a little. There are or were a number of distinct types of society among aṣọ òkè weavers, all of which might loosely be described as guilds, or called by the Yorùbá term *ẹgbẹ*.

Firstly, although there is very little contemporary evidence to support this, it is generally accepted by Yorùbá historians that there were "guilds" in pre-colonial Yorùbá towns that were responsible for organizing an annual tribute, *ìsingbà*, to the ruler. The fullest description of this is provided by Falola in his account of the pre-colonial economy of the newly established city of Ìbàdàn (1984:68, 77). Although they were responsible for passing on any edicts, orders, or demands from the court to craftsmen or women, it is unlikely that they would have exercised any control over training, access to the craft, quality standards, or the other activities of medieval European guilds. Where these organisations were present they seem to have been the basis from which the C20th societies of master weavers evolved.

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In Ìbàdàn the founding of an Ègbé Aláṣòkè is associated with a nineteenth century master weaver called Oluokun (Ogunsanwo 1986:41), although the reported traditions surrounding this man are contradictory. (According to Ogunsanwo he founded the society in the 1890s after introducing cloth weaving to the city from Ilá, but Falola (1984:100) notes that he migrated from Ìsẹ̀yìn in the 1830s establishing the Òkè-Oluokun quarter where weaving is still a popular trade.) In towns where master weavers travelled to two different cloth markets separate societies evolved to represent these: thus in both Ìsẹ̀yìn and Òyó, and possibly also Ìlórín throughout the 1950's and 1960's there were two societies called Ègbé Èrò Ìbàdàn and Ègbé Èrò Èkó (i.e. Society of travellers to Ìbàdàn and Lagos). When the market at Lagos fell into gradual disuse in the 1970s the Ìbàdàn society became in effect the sole Ègbé Aláṣòkè for each town, grouped together under a pan-Yorùbá society that met regularly in Ìbàdàn, the Ègbé Awon Aláṣòkè. The Ìbàdàn society itself was called the Ifelodun Native Cloth Traders Association (Okuwa 1989:45) and as host was responsible for organizing and maintaining Òjé market. Following the move by the majority of weavers and their society to Òyó in late 1993 the Ìbàdàn society still meets with the remnants of the weavers from other towns and claims that the society it controls still represents all Yorùbá weavers.

Secondly, there were a number of guilds established in the late 1940s by trainees who had completed courses at the Textile Training Centres established by the colonial Department of Commerce and Industry (see Clarke 1996, Renne 1997, Wolff and Wahab 1996, and Olaoye 1993, for discussions of the impact of these schemes in Òyó, Adó-Èkítì, Ìsẹ̀yìn, and Ìlórín respectively.) These often had grandiose and wildly misleading titles. For example the "Ilorin Weavers Guild" was established in 1950 by 12 such graduates, but had collapsed after less than a year after they were unable to



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service a loan for equipment costs (NAI Ọyọ Prof 1/1/1757 vol.1 page 8 and following.) At first the sponsors of such groups anticipated that they would rapidly supplant the existing industry as all the weavers converted to what they perceived to be a more efficient technology. It quickly became apparent however that this was not going to happen. Nevertheless in many official reports these bodies were often taken to be representative of the local weaving industry in general, and this error has sometimes crept into the subsequent literature. Thus Keyes-Adenaike's claim that the Perseverance Union of Weavers, set up in 1951 with official assistance "proceeded to 'organize' traditional weaving. A tidy profit was realized and the competition was reduced" (1993:176) is mistaken. In fact the Perseverance Union of Weavers was a small group of TTC graduates using European broadlooms, including one Mr. Falodun. Although like other broadloom weavers they occasionally received orders to replicate aṣọ òkè designs or to dye thread for aṣọ òkè weavers they had no direct involvement with the "traditional" weavers, and certainly did not 'organize' them. Deacon Falodun was still weaving from time to time in 1996 and talked to us at length about his career (Clarke 1996).

In fact the impact of these colonially sponsored organizations was more subtle and brings us to the third type of weavers' society. Inspired by the example of the TTC graduates the aṣọ òkè weavers' re-christened their existing lineage groups as "guilds" or *ẹgbẹ*. Thus in 1950 Bascom (Bascom and Boyer n.d:15) found that the senior master weaver of Malába compound was also the head, *olóri ẹgbẹ*, of a guild bringing together related weavers from other compounds in the same lineage, totaling about 100 weavers working at six different sites. He estimated that there were about 40 such "guilds" in Ọyọ at the time. He noted that in times of trouble a weaver could turn to the guild head for assistance. In practice however there seems to have been little difference between the "guild" and the lineage as an entity that held occasional

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meeting<sup>s</sup> to discuss and resolve problems facing its members. The terminology of “guilds” and societies was adopted to meet the fashion of the time, then gradually discarded over the years. Today none of the weavers in Ọyọ have such a lineage guild, but they would still hold meetings of senior men and women to discuss any issues that arose affecting the lineage.

The fourth type of society was the cooperatives that arose, again as a result of government sponsorship, in various towns from the 1940s to the early 1960s. Bray (1966:102-107) noted that there were four of these in Ịsẹyìn by 1966, and that their primary purpose was to lower raw material costs by the bulk purchase of thread, although in some cases they also made loans to members. None of these co-ops survived the 1970s. At least in Ịsẹyìn their failure is attributed to their involvement in the abortive attempt to set up a centre for broadloom weaving (interview Alhaji Keganhe 17/1/1996) and to problems dealing with the manufacturers of thread (interview Alhaji Olorunkemi 15/2/1996.) The records of the Ịbàdàn Cooperative Department record some details of a visit by the colonial official to explain, as he put it “the need for cooperative organization” to the weavers of Abẹ̀òkúta. Of the weavers’ society he noted that attendance at their fortnightly meeting was small, that they had no funds but could raise a one-off levy to meet special needs, and that the secretary was unable (in his opinion) to take adequate minutes. The society was based in the Ịjàyẹ quarter, with the Bálẹ̀ of Ịjàyẹ as its head (NAI Ibadan Co-operative Department 1/1/1969 page 5) - the Ịjàyẹ, who were mostly of Ọyọ origin, fled to Abẹ̀òkúta in 1862 following their defeat in a lengthy war with Ịbàdàn (Smith 1969:164).

Although colonial interventions seem to have had little lasting impact on the structure of organizations among aṣọ òkè weavers, they have influenced aspects such as the rules and aspirations. Colonial and post colonial rules governing the conduct of societies, doubtless themselves influenced by

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knowledge of European guilds, are responsible for the idea that such societies should have functions such as controlling prices, regulating quality, and even registering new patterns. These aspirations are often enshrined in the rules of societies, and in some cases printed on their rule books distributed to members (as in *Ìbàdàn* today.) Naturally officials of such societies will confirm if asked that that is indeed what they do (Lamb and Holmes 1980:29). However it is important to distinguish these aspirations from the reality of what weavers' societies actually do. It quickly became clear that in practice none of the societies attempts to fulfil any of this type of regulatory function which would require full-time supervision of members.

Finally, as we saw in *Ọyó*, there are a variety of more or less ad-hoc societies grouping together some master weavers, either on the basis of social ties, or of area of origin, as well as a number of *èsúsú*.

38. Interview: 17/7/95, Alhaji Oriolowo Olatunji, Chairman *Ọyó* Weavers Society. Interview :12/12/95, Alhaji Shittu Gbeko, Chairman *Ìsẹ̀yìn* Weavers Society.

39. *Kájọ̀la* is the local government area covering the towns of *Òkè-ìhò*, *Iwerré*, and *Iganna*, to the west of *Ìsẹ̀yìn*, where there are substantial numbers of weavers. Among the other towns with significant weaving communities absent from this list are *Ìbàdàn*, *Lagos*, *Şakí*, and *Ogbómòşó*.

40. See Bascom 1952 for details of *èsúsú*.

41. Interview: Mr. Rasheed Tafa, *Ọyó*, 21/12/95

42. Attempting to assess with any degree of accuracy just how many weavers there are in a city the size of *Ìlọ́rín* without accurate census data is extremely problematic. In an assessment report on *Ìlọ́rín* compiled in 1922 by Captain H.E.Priestman (National Archive Kaduna Ilorprof 1177/149/1922) the following figures were provided: Male weavers 2041, male spinners 44, male dyers 1 ; Female weavers 5832, spinners 4413, dyers 1116. Figures such as

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these based on tax returns are of course liable to considerable under reporting, particularly by those with other sources of income also. O'Hear (1987:514) reports that the tax returns for 1955-56 show only 800 male weavers. She discusses various supply and demand factors over the intervening years, including greater access to education, that have contributed to fluctuations in weavers' numbers but concludes "the indications are that there has been some overall decline in weavers' numbers in Ilorin since the early years of the colonial period, but the evidence is sketchy and conflicting"(ibid). On the other hand however, Olaoye (1993:143) claims that there are about 70,000 weavers active in Ilorin. Although he notes that he arrived at this number on the basis of his fieldwork, he provides no information on the methodology used. On the face of it 70,000 would seem an extremely high estimate. After numerous visits to the weaving districts of Ilorin, discussions with several Ilorin master weavers, and considering the predominance of Ilorin weavers at the cloth markets, I would suggest that the true figure is somewhat lower, probably between 10,000 and 15,000. This is still a very large number of weavers and reflects the currently thriving condition of the industry. Another recent treatment of aṣọ òkè weaving (Keyes-Adenaike 1993) virtually ignores the weaving industry in Ilorin, while presenting an idiosyncratic account of the development of weaving in Iséyìn, which is described as the dominant centre in a declining industry (ibid:225-7).

43. Bray (1966:38). The same problems of numerical assessment apply to Iséyìn. Dodwell (1955:118) estimated that there were around 2,500 adult weavers, while Bray (1966:i) suggested around 7,500. Iséyìn is now something of a backwater with few other occupations to offer and as such has certainly grown in population far more slowly than cities such as Ilorin, or even Òyó. In the C19th it was on major trade routes running both north to south, and westwards towards Gonja, and it clearly benefited from being in an

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easily defensible site surrounded by a ring of hills at a period when most of the other towns in the region were destroyed in warfare (Babalola 1991:97). In the early part of the twentieth century the cross-country trade route was still important in the transport of cloth to Ghana and the main road linked Ẹsẹ̀yìn to the cloth market at Abẹ̀òkúta (see page 227 below.) Subsequently this export trade from Ẹsẹ̀yìn has ended, the road to Abẹ̀òkúta fallen into disrepair, and Ẹsẹ̀yìn become relatively remote. (In early 1998 the long-abandoned old road that connected Ẹsẹ̀yìn directly to Ìbàdàn was resurfaced - a new link that may have an impact on future trade patterns.) The number of weavers however has been at least sustained. I would tentatively estimate today's figure to be of the order of 7,500 to 10,000.

44. Interview: Alhaji Gbeko, Ẹsẹ̀yìn, 12/12/95

45. Wolff and Wahab (1996:77) appear to have completed their research in 1993 just prior to this move which was the culmination of a long period of acrimonious argument and several earlier unsuccessful attempts to establish a market in Ọ̀yọ́. Since November 1993 Ọ̀jẹ́ is no longer the dominant cloth market they describe, although it remains an important market attended by a minority of Ẹsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín weavers. See chapter 5 below.

46. The figure for female weavers in 1922 in note 42 above refers of course to weavers on the upright single heddle loom. Whilst in the 1970s Holmes (Lamb and Holmes 1980:196) found that there was still a sizable number of women using this loom in the Pàkátà district of Ìlọ́rín. In 1997 after extensive searching I located two women in the area who still wove an occasional cloth for family celebrations but it was clear that as a regular trade the single-heddle loom was defunct.

47. See Akinlami 1989 for weaving in Oṇḍó.

48. Interview: Mr. Rasheed Tafa, Ọ̀yọ́, 21/12/95

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49. Among the patterns in which the weavers of Èkẹjọ compound specialized when Alhaji Rasak was a trainee were two called “*alálùbòsà*” (with onions), and “*kájọla*” (let’s go together). Unfortunately almost every other weaver insisted that they used to weave the three prestige cloths in their compound, so it was not possible to map these old designs extensively.

50. Bascom and Boyer n.d: 9

51. For other comments on Yorùbá colour terminology see pages 13-14 above.

52. See Bascom and Boyer n.d. for an exhaustive description of the decorative and technical features of the cloths in the Bascom collection.

53. It is difficult to quantify the extent of this increased reliance on orders which is recognized by many weavers.

54. Although Murray noted that unlike in other crafts the colonial terminology of “free”, “apprentice” etc. was rarely heard in the late 1930s (Murray & Hunt Cooke 1938:3). The practice of charging fees for apprenticeship is, although in a form influenced by colonial practice in other crafts, a reflection of a long standing belief in the appropriateness of exchanging payment for knowledge and training, and not due, as Keyes-Adenaike suggests (1993:226), to some newly perceived need in the 1920s and 30s to restrict access and maintain a hereditary monopoly. The evidence suggests that weavers have always been prepared to pass on their skills to non-family members - understandably so, since as we have seen access to a flow of apprentices is a key to success as a master weaver. Indeed in the late 1930s Murray (op.cit) noted that fees were rarely charged and weavers often took on the sons of strangers. Callaway also found that weavers in Ìbàdàn in the early 1960s were not charging fees, and were finding it difficult to attract apprentices from outside the family (1964:69). As now the weavers would assess their relative need for labour and only charge fees if they felt the parents of potential recruits would not be discouraged.

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55. In these key aspects, although he did not report any “daily pay”, my findings agree with Bascom’s data from Ọyọ in 1951 (Bascom and Boyer nd:23). A similar account, again noting payment by output but not daily, was given in a letter by R.Wilkes, a District Officer in Ọyọ Division writing about Ịsẹyìn in 1947 (NAI Ọyọ Prof 1/1/1757 vol II). However Bray (1966:97-98) suggests that master weavers she interviewed were using their capital to buy thread for dependent weavers, marketing the cloth for them, but handing over the profit to them also and only retaining a small commission. This is rather puzzling since it seems inherently unlikely that any master weavers would tie up their limited capital in this way for another, less senior, mans benefit. My interpreter and field assistant had considerable difficulty in even explaining this prospect to any of the master weavers we interviewed. None of the elderly weavers interviewed in Ịsẹyìn acknowledged any memory of this system.

## Chapter Four - Women Weavers

### Women as weavers in Ìbàdàn: changes in the gender division of labour.

*“Kò já, ọ̀bọ kọ hun. Tí kò bá ẹ wípé ó ní já ọ̀bọ lè hun ẹ.”*

(If it didn't break the monkey could weave. If it wasn't for the thread breaking monkeys would be able to weave). Proverb quoted by an Ìsẹ̀yìn master weaver asked about women weavers.

*“Bí ọ̀kùnrín rí ejò, bí obìnrin páa, kí ejò sáà mǎa ti lọ”*

(Whether a man sees a snake, or whether a woman kills it, the important thing is that it has gone) Abraham 1958:106.

On a small patch of bare ground down a narrow track from Olorunsogo bus stop on the Lagos to Ìbàdàn expressway young women chat together as they prepare spools of thread and weave the long multicolored warps that stretch out from a cluster of looms. On the verandah of the adjacent house their manager and mistress sits playing with her baby and talking to a neighbour who sells soap, matches, cigarettes, and bread from a small table. Alhaja Mariamo Oloruntobi is an independent weaving proprietor<sup>1</sup>, one of the growing numbers of women weavers who may now be found in Ìbàdàn and other cities in the Yorùbá-speaking region. Although, as we shall see, the first training of women as aṣọ òkè weavers seems to have taken place far from Ìbàdàn in the mid-1960s, the numbers involved have increased exponentially in the 1990s, to the extent that women now dominate production of the cloth in the city and other regions outside of the established weaving heartland of Ìsẹ̀yìn, Ilorin, and Òyó. In Ìbàdàn, Abéòkúta, Ifè, Ilésà, and even Lagos, cities



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which are key markets for *aşo òkè*, the majority of weavers in the mid-1990s are young women. Key differences in the career path of these young women, as compared to that favoured by the majority of compound-based male weavers discussed in the previous chapter, will be shown to be a major factor in this rapid growth of female participation.

The movement of women into *aşo òkè* weaving may be understood as the latest phase in an ongoing process of change in the gender basis of division of labour in textile production in the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria, albeit one that highlights the continued importance of long established regional variations. I will suggest that this phase is marked by a shift from gender complementarity in textile production to competition, analogous to that detected by Afonja and Aina (1995:56-78) in their study of recent changes in women's participation in agricultural production. Based mainly on data collected in Ìbàdàn and elsewhere in 1995 and early 1996, this chapter aims to complement recent research by Renne (1997) in Èkìtì, a region where the historical background of women's contribution to textile production is somewhat different. The Èkìtì region will prove to be an important contributor to the story of developments elsewhere.

The majority of the new generation of women weavers use the familiar double-heddle loom described earlier. A significant minority however produce *aşo òkè* on broad looms of European design introduced to Nigeria during the colonial period. This discussion of women's weaving will therefore require a consideration of government intervention in the training and recruitment of weavers in the region in the 1940s through the establishment of Textile Training Centres. Government attempts to intervene in the weaving industry have continued more recently through schemes such as Mrs. Maryam Babangida's "Better Life For Rural Women", and the National Directorate of

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Employment, although my research suggests that these have played only a minor role in the shift in recruitment towards women.

The recent surge of female participation in *aşo òkè* weaving has coincided with a period of rapid design change and it might seem reasonable to anticipate that the two developments are connected. However the evidence indicates that this is not the case, and that we must look elsewhere, to an interaction between professional traders and master weavers from which women weavers are at present largely excluded, for the real motor of design innovation. With the exception of the imitation of narrow-strip cloth on the European broad loom, the range of designs woven by the women are much the same as those produced by the male weavers we have already looked at, illustrated here by the samples from Èkejó compound (see Appendix A.) The current apparently marginal position of women weavers in relation to the main marketing system for *aşo òkè*, despite their growing numerical predominance in some regions, is also reflected in the relatively relaxed response of male weavers to the increasing competitive threat now posed by women.

### **An Ibàdàn Weaver:**

A brief case study of a successful woman weaving entrepreneur will introduce some of the present circumstances of women's weaving in the city of Ibàdàn, before we proceed to consider the more general picture and explore aspects of its historical antecedents. Although as will become apparent over the following pages there is considerable variation in the personal background and religious affiliation of recent entrants to the weaving industry, much of the details of the structure of the business and the organization of marketing will prove to be fairly representative of the general pattern.

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Alhaja Mariamo Oloruntobi was twenty-two years old when she went on the Haj to Saudi Arabia in 1995. She had left school six years earlier after completing her Junior Secondary School near her family house in Ìbàdàn. She was then apprenticed as a weaver to one Alhaja Barakat, who operates an aṣò òkè weaving business in the nearby Àrẹ̀mọ̀ district. She chose to become a weaver, she recalls<sup>2</sup>, because she thought that it looked like an interesting job in which she would be able to make money. After serving a three year apprenticeship paid for by her parents she was granted her “freedom” at a small ceremony attended by her family and other weavers from the area. She was then able to start weaving alone, with a single loom bought by her father, set up outside their house.

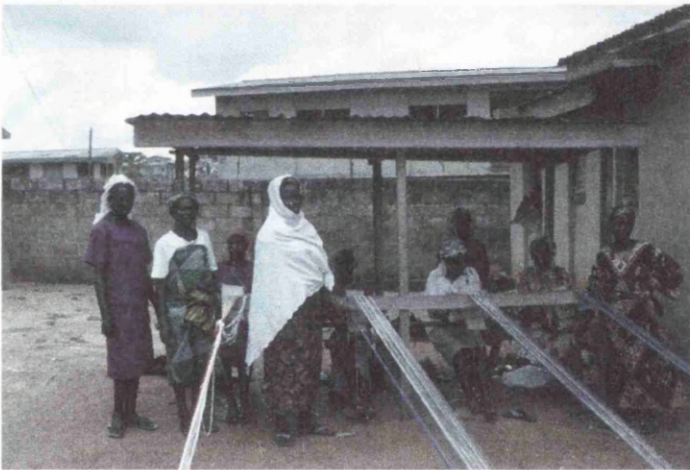


Figure 29: Alhaja Oloruntobi (centre) with some of her apprentices (seated and standing at left), Ìbàdàn, 1996.

Soon afterwards she married and moved into rented rooms in the same area. Her husband works at the local government secretariat and plays no role in her weaving business. She rapidly attracted girls and young women as apprentices whom she taught to prepare the thread and weave, working at a set of five looms built as a row in a single carpentered frame. Since there was no suitable flat space outside her own house (the area, which was developed quite recently, is built on small hills crisscrossed by deeply eroded ditches) she

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rented land down the hill near the expressway. The charge for renting a patch of land big enough for the looms is nominal - she paid N5 a month until early 1997 when it was raised to a still modest N50. Each apprentice is charged a fee of N1000 for a three year contract. In early 1996 she had twelve apprentices, while the number had fallen to ten a year later. The youngest apprentice was 14 years old, the oldest 20. All of the apprentices, who come from families in the Àrẹ̀mọ̀ area or nearby districts of Ìbàdàn, go home to their families to eat and sleep. They wear a uniform consisting of a purple cotton dress. Alhaja Oloruntobi supervises the work of the apprentices, distributing tasks to them and, intervening herself when a problem arises such as a warp becoming badly tangled.

Fees from apprentices provide a significant boost to the income gained by selling cloth. The Alhaja buys her thread from wholesalers in the centre of Ìbàdàn, using money she receives as an advance from people who have ordered cloth. She has never woven cloth to sell at any of the markets. Instead she relies on orders received from people who come to find her at the workshop or in her room. These are mostly local residents and contacts made through members of her family, although she remembers that on one occasion she sold cloth to a Lagos woman who wanted to take it to London. She is a member of an organization, called the Ègbé Ajẹ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀, that groups all the weavers in the district, holds regular meetings to discuss disputes, and occasionally distributes large orders amongst society members. Of more significance to her socially and as a unit for mutual assistance is her continued friendship with the woman who trained her, Alhaja Barakat, and with a number of other women weavers in the district, including several who were apprentices at the same time. She also maintains close ties with most of her own former apprentices.

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When asked how far her career as a weaver had fulfilled her original expectations Alhaja Oloruntobi commented that although business is difficult because of the depressed economy, and that she could take on more apprentices and handle more orders, in general she is satisfied with her success as a weaver. A measure of this success is that she has been able to complete the Hajj at such a young age. She states that she cannot remember anyone who has criticized her career choice or suggested that weaving was not a suitable occupation for a woman.

### **Women as weavers in Ìbàdàn:**

Ìbàdàn was founded by Òyó and Ègbá refugees in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>3</sup> and rapidly became the predominant Yorùbá city. In the twentieth century, assisted by its role as capital of Western Region, and more recently, of Òyó State, it has been rivaled in size and significance only by Lagos. Unlike most other Yorùbá cities where indigenes are overwhelmingly predominant, Ìbàdàn continues to draw huge numbers of migrants from throughout the Yorùba-speaking area, as well as from elsewhere in Nigeria<sup>4</sup>. Families who have been living there for many years maintain close contacts with and loyalties to their towns of origin. The boundaries of the city expand continuously as new areas are built up in a largely unplanned and unmapped urban sprawl that now dwarfs the older central areas.

Women may be seen weaving in small groups by the side of roads in most areas of the city<sup>5</sup>, although they are more numerous in the newer low and middle income districts than in the old core of the town and the more expensive residential areas. Away from the main roads, in the concrete yards behind houses or on spaces not yet built on, and sometimes even inside half-finished houses, are more clusters of weavers. A few of these are women

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weaving alone, but more often there is a manager with a small number of apprentices. The organizational basis and form of these groups differs significantly from the compound-based weaving units described in the previous chapter (and which are still the norm in the small but long established weaving community in such older areas of Ìbàdàn as Òjé, Òkè Olúòkùn, and Kúḍètì, where male master weavers predominate and the number of women weavers working in male-controlled groups is not much greater than the ten percent or so found in cities such as Òyó,)

The proprietor often gives the business a name, which will be displayed on a painted sign on the weaving shed, or on the office of larger groups. These names reflect the prevalent organizational form as a training institute, a form that draws on a longer history of women's occupational education in Nigeria through "sewing institutes" and colonial "domestic science" courses<sup>6</sup>. Thus the names usually end with "Weaving Institute" or "Weaving Centre", while using the usual repertoire of religious sources as a primary inspiration. Names encountered amongst the survey group included "Oluwa Ni O Şe Weaving Institute" (i.e. 'It is God who did it'), "Omo Jesu Weaving Centre" ('Child of Jesus'), "Ola Oluwa Weaving Institute" ('Glory of God'), etc<sup>7</sup>. In keeping with the form of a training centre it was quite common, particularly among the larger groups, for the apprentices to wear a uniform dress - this is also common practice for girls apprenticed to seamstresses but is not found among male weavers. Of the fifty weaving groups surveyed in Ìbàdàn, thirty-two women had five apprentices or less, but eight others had between fifteen and twenty, while one woman had thirty apprentices. The total number of apprentices in the survey group was three hundred and forty-eight, of whom only one was male.

We have seen in the previous chapter that male weavers are still primarily organized on the basis of kinship relations within a family compound, with other non-related boys, and recently girls, coming to learn as

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apprentices of the master weaver within the compound. Although there are bilateral elements to Yorùbá kinship systems, and the ownership and inheritance of land by women is becoming increasingly common (Eades 1980:50-60, Afonja 1986a, 1986b), it is still generally the case that women move away from their family homes on marriage or to establish a business. In a city such as Ìbàdàn where most families live in one or two rented rooms, young women who have completed their apprenticeship are often expected to move even before marriage. Thus, unlike their male counterparts, women weavers normally<sup>8</sup> establish businesses away from their family using rented land or a convenient space in the yard of the house where they have rented accommodation. Moreover, a significant majority are new entrants to the industry rather than following a lineage specialization - 60% of those surveyed had no other weavers in their family, while the remaining respondents included two whose mother or grandmother had been a single-heddle loom weaver and several whose sister or brother's wife had also learnt recently.

These differences in business organization and location from that found among male weavers were mirrored in other areas such as sources of recruitment, age and career pattern, and religious affiliation. Although the oldest women weavers located were in their early 40s, the vast majority were only in their mid twenties. On average it was about six years since they had begun to learn to weave and only three ladies had been weaving for more than ten years. Very few of them therefore had children old enough to become trainees, and this was reflected in their reliance for recruits on girls sent by other families in the neighbourhood. Only 40% claimed to be natives of Ìbàdàn, while a large proportion of the remainder came from the eastern part of the Yorùbá area where the older tradition of single-heddle weaving by women was most strong - a further 40% were natives of Òsun or Oṅdó states<sup>9</sup>. The balance of religious affiliation, reflecting in part the variations in the relative

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popularity of Christianity in these states and in the newer areas of Ìbàdàn, was markedly different from the almost universal adherence to Islam among male weavers we noted in the previous chapter. Of the fifty weavers surveyed, thirty-eight were Christians and twelve Muslims. Alhaja Olorunfemi and the weaver who trained her were therefore atypical in this respect.

Although as we have seen, a majority of the women were not natives of Ìbàdàn virtually all of them learnt to weave there - the exceptions were three who learnt in their home town of Iléṣà, three others who were sent by their parents to weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn, and one of the oldest women who was a native of Ṣakí. Apart from these last four, all of them were themselves taught to weave by women. As might be expected from the youth of most of the women, only a minority had had any other occupation before taking up weaving. These occupations included two “salary earners”, a civil servant, a nurse, a trainee teacher, two seamstresses, and a hairdresser, plus thirteen others who claimed to have been traders. With the exception of the civil servant<sup>10</sup>, these provide a good insight into the career options open to young women of low and middle income families in Ìbàdàn today, with weaving now comparing favourably in terms of conditions and earnings potential with options such as teaching and nursing open only to the relatively well educated. As Renne (1997:783) found in Èkìtì, the poor salaries paid to government employees and the lack of private sector employment in the current depressed economy have greatly enhanced the perceived attractions of weaving<sup>11</sup>. Apart from the large number of women who said that they had chosen the work because they loved weaving or found it interesting, others said that it was more profitable, less strenuous, and of higher status than trading, that the capital costs were low, and one former trader noted that unlike trading it brought her peace of mind and that she no longer had to worry about sales made on credit. Only one respondent reported that her parents had chosen the career, while three said that God had chosen for them<sup>12</sup>.



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It was also apparent that weaving had proved quite a suitable sedentary occupation for young mothers - several heavily pregnant women were continuing to weave, while babies and small children could sleep beside their mothers on the loom seat or play around the weaving area more safely than in a crowded market. This is an important factor since child-care is an almost exclusively female responsibility in Nigeria and can often be a major constraint on women's participation in the labour force.

Friendship and links between weavers and their former apprentices were important ties for these women, overlying the more formal linkage with other weavers through a system of regionally based weavers' societies. As we met more weavers in an area it was clear <sup>that</sup> many of the women had become close friends despite competing for the same local customers. These ties could be drawn on for assistance in meeting unexpected thread shortages, to share out large orders, or to help resolve disputes with customers. The societies, most of which are simply named after the district, such as Ègbé Aṣọ Òkè Anfani, are affiliated to an organization called the Federation of Local Craft of Aso Oke Weavers of Oyo State, which supplies membership cards and rulebooks<sup>13</sup>.

I was able to attend one<sup>14</sup> of the fortnightly meetings of the Ajègèdè society in June 1996. Two of the key officials, the chairman and the treasurer, were men, although they were the only males among the fifty or so weavers who were present. Discussions at the meeting were primarily concerned with a dispute during which the police had become involved after a weaver had failed to fulfill an order for which she had been paid. Officials of the society were attempting to plead on her behalf with the police. All members are supposed to attend each meeting, which lasts about 30 minutes to an hour, and a small levy is collected each time. Fines are charged for absentees who fail to notify the secretary in advance. Several of the women told me of large orders which had

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been shared out among society members, although this seemed to be quite a rare occurrence. Only three weavers in the survey group did not belong to a society and these had only just completed their apprenticeship. As with the societies discussed in the previous chapter there was very little actual involvement in setting conditions of trade or regulating the craft.

### **From complementary labour to competition ?**

If it is apparent with hindsight that double-heddle loom weaving is indeed a suitable career for young women, we must still address the question of why the late 1980s and early 1990s saw such a dramatic rise in female double-heddle loom weaving. The pre-colonial economy of southwestern Nigeria had evolved a highly complex and flexible system of production and exchange based on both local specialization and division of labour by gender. As we have seen, textile production was an important component of this economy. Based largely in the heartland of the old Òyó empire double-heddle loom weaving brought together the complementary skills of male and female farmers, female processors and spinners of cotton and dyers of thread, with male weavers, cloth beaters, tailors, and embroiderers. The production of cloth on single-heddle looms, although also practiced in the Òyó area, was most important around Èkìtì, Bùnù, and Ìlá in the east, and Ìjẹ̀bu to the south. It too involved a complementarity of male and female contributions, although women as weavers and organizers of production exercised a greater role.

Within the overall complexity of the division of labour there were certain tasks that were usually only performed by men, others that were the preserve of women, while a few were apparently open to both sexes<sup>15</sup>. However the Yorùbá proverb that introduced this chapter “*Bí ọ̀kùnṛín rí ejò, bí ọ̀bìnṛín pàá, kí ejò sàá mǎa ti lọ*” (Whether a man sees a snake, or whether a

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woman kills it, the important thing is that it has gone) (Abraham 1958:106) has been cited in support of arguments that gender ideology was flexible in Yorùbá societies (Aina 1995:95). Only in a few cases were ideas about appropriate gender roles reinforced by the kind of supernatural sanctions that barred women from involvement in iron smelting or men from digging clay for pottery (Fatunsin 1992:15). Although elsewhere in West Africa restrictions of this kind are reported in relation to weaving - for example Rattray records that among the Asante menstruating women must not touch the looms (1927:235), while Aronson notes that impotence or even death threatened men in Akwete should they attempt to weave (1989:47) - there is no evidence that beliefs of this nature were widespread among the Yorùbá. Indeed recent scholarship has suggested that in some Yorùbá-speaking areas the upright single-heddle loom was used by men when certain ritually important cloths were required (Akinwumi 1990:140, Renne 1995:104-107). Some authors have proposed that prior to the introduction of the double-heddle loom it was Yorùbá men weaving on the single-heddle loom that supplied the large-scale coastal trade with Europeans<sup>16</sup>, but this speculation does not appear to be supported by any substantive evidence.

The colonial intervention in the region from the mid-nineteenth century brought with it an ever widening range of occupational specialization. The British also brought to Nigeria their own ideas about appropriate roles for women which were imposed on, and in many cases conflicted with local expectations. As we have suggested these local expectations were not always fixed. On balance it would appear that the gender ideology underlying the division of labour that characterized Yoruba weaving until the recent past was not deeply restrictive. Moreover there was no evidence from any of the women weavers I spoke to that they had encountered any opposition or hostility to their decision to take up narrow-strip weaving.

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If we are to understand the present large scale movement of women into the *aşo òkè* industry we should see this relatively permissive gender ideology as an enabling condition, but we must look elsewhere for the specific historical developments that contributed to the move. Developments in two other areas of the Yorùbá-speaking region, *Şakí* in the extreme northwest, and *Adó Èkìtì* and other towns in the east, were significant precursors, initiating a breach that has since taken on wider importance in a decade when a prolonged period of large-scale youth unemployment and restrictive economic policies has been combined with relatively buoyant demand for *aşo òkè*. This has led to a marked shift from previous patterns of labour complementarity between genders in textile production to one of ever increasing competition.

### **Şakí:**

*Şakí* is the only Yorùbá town with a significant long-established weaving community where the overwhelming majority of narrow-strip weavers are women. Moreover it is an old *Òyó* Yorùbá town which was once a major kingdom in the *Òyó* empire. Today it is a substantial town in the extreme northwest of the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria, some 70 km north of *Ìsẹ̀yìn* in a hilly district that has been sparsely populated since the wars of the nineteenth century. Although once an important town on the long distance trade routes to *Gonja* and the north, the reorientation of trade to the railway and new roads in the twentieth century has left the town isolated and remote, accessible only by a narrow and poorly maintained road that continues to the nearby border with the Benin Republic. The economic problems caused by this unpromising location and poor infrastructure have changed little since the 1960s (Mabogunje and Oyawoye 1961), with many of the younger and better educated citizens migrating to *Lagos*, *Ìbàdàn*, or even further in search of employment. *Şakí* residents were a major component of the

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migration of Yorùbá to Ghana from the 1930s to 1960s, and were important in the export trade in *aşo òkè* (Eades 1994:35) until the expulsion of Nigerians from Ghana in 1969. In the 1990s Şakí remains a surprisingly large but quiet town mainly reliant on farming and remittances from family members.

Despite the prominent role played by traders from Şakí in the cloth export trade, the weaving community in the town was small compared to the major weaving centres of Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlórín. The Òyó Province Annual Report for 1922<sup>17</sup> noted that the principal industry of the town was Shea butter processing, but there was “a certain amount of weaving”. At the end of the 1940s the number of men weaving on the double-heddle loom was put at around 50, while a small number of women used the upright single-heddle loom (Lloyd 1953:31). Early in the 1960s it was noted that only a few families, most of whom claimed to originate in old Òyó, were still weaving, and that these were concentrated in the Bapon quarter of the town (Mabogunje and Oyawoye 1961:7.)



Figure 30: Mrs Juliana Ajayi, chairwoman of the women's section of the Şakí weavers' society, with two of her daughters who are trainee weavers, 1996.

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Jeremy Eades (1994:43) who did his field research at the end of the same decade writes of Şakí and neighbouring Igbòho :“Weaving survived there, but failed to be the major factor in the economy that it was in Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín, with their better access to raw materials and to markets.”

By the mid-1990s however, weaving had become a major industry in the town, employing several thousand women, together with a far smaller number of men<sup>18</sup>. The first generation of women in Şakí to take up *aşo òkè* weaving began their training with male relatives or other local weavers in 1966 and 1967, completing their apprenticeship around 1969 or 1970. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was a time when the rapid decline of local dyeing, consequent on the switch to factory produced thread, would have released significant numbers of younger women from their previous role in the occupational structure of weaving compounds. Mrs. Juliana Ajayi, who is now the chairwoman of the women’s section of the weavers’ society, was among these women, becoming “free” in 1970<sup>19</sup>. Since that time she has trained about thirty other young women and she currently operates a pair of looms outside her house with the assistance of two of her younger daughters.

The senior male weaver in Şakí, and chairman of the weavers’ society *Egbé Bàşírí*<sup>20</sup>, Alhaji Shittu Olayiwola Oyesade, is in his mid-seventies. He clearly remembers the time before Şakí women wove, except for the few who used “looms made on the wall.” He told me<sup>21</sup>: “Nothing happened that made us say that they should learn it. Most of the weavers did not have sons. I mean those old men, so when they did not have boys among their children, they tried the girls. The women were only spinning thread before, but when we tried them and it was successful, that was when everybody started to bring their children there.” It would seem likely that what is being referred to here is a shortage of male recruits to the industry consequent on the large scale migration of youths in search of employment in more developed regions, plus

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perhaps the spread of secondary education for boys. Narrow-strip weaving by women rapidly became established in the town, with the first and subsequent waves of women setting up independent businesses which recruited other girls as apprentices, in addition to those trained by the remaining male master-weavers.

In the brief period since the end of the 1960s the transition of weaving to a primarily female profession has become enshrined in local gender ideology. Although the chairman and his officials said that weaving was good for both men and women, both women weavers and non-weaving men asserted that weaving was really women's work. When I told people that I had come to Şakí because I had heard that there were many women weaving there, many volunteered the opinion that in their town men did not like to weave because it was the work of women, and that it was better for men to be going out to the farms. It is clear that this kind of opinion can be both established in a few decades and held despite the general knowledge that in other major weaving towns the majority of weavers are men. Very similar views were recorded by Elisha Renne in Èkìtì (1993:4), but that is an area without an established tradition of male weaving<sup>22</sup>. While the movement of a few women in Şakí into aşo òkè weaving can be understood as a response to a localized labour supply problem resulting from the specific economic difficulties of a remote region, we must also consider why there has been such a marked expansion in the overall number of weavers there over the last two decades. Here we need to look at the demand for aşo òkè woven in the town. Most weavers in Şakí are reliant on an entirely separate marketing network from that utilized by the main centres of aşo òkè weaving such as Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín. None of the Şakí weavers normally attend the major wholesale cloth markets at Aráṣmí in Ọ̀yọ́ and at Èdẹ̀. One of the older male master weavers does go to Ọ̀jẹ́ market in Ìbàdàn, where he does a considerable volume of business, but he is very much an

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exception. Instead of taking their cloth on what amounts to a four or five hour journey to Òyó or Ìbàdàn, the vast majority of weavers in Şakí attend a market that is held in the Şàngó district of the town every sixteenth day. Local people come to this market to buy cloth for their ceremonies, but the most important customers are traders from across the nearby border with the Benin Republic. Most cloth woven in Şakí is therefore destined for the unofficial export trade and sale in markets whose customers are also comparatively isolated from the latest trends in aşò òkè fashion. It is this external demand which has sustained the rapidly growing numbers of women weavers in Şakí<sup>23</sup>. Prompted by this demand young women weavers have been able to pass on their newly acquired skills rapidly to following generations of apprentices, in a pattern which we shall discuss in the context of Ìbàdàn below.

In the preceding paragraphs the isolation of Şakí from the mainstream of developments in the aşò òkè industry has been stressed. Like other such remote towns, its output tends to lag behind the pace of stylistic innovation, but no separate regional design repertoire has developed. Nevertheless the events we have described are an important precursor of the wider movement of women into the trade in the central Yorùbá region for several reasons. As far as I have been able to establish<sup>24</sup>, Şakí was the first town where significant numbers of Yorùbá women took up narrow-strip weaving, and the first generation of these weavers, in their forties today, are the oldest women 'master' weavers active. As such it has set a precedent which, although it has not been documented in the previous literature on aşò òkè, is quite widely known about by weavers elsewhere. Şakí weavers are aware of their pioneering role - the chairman of their society claimed proudly<sup>25</sup> that "in Upper Ògùn, from Iséyín to Òyó, to Ogbómòşó, if you see a woman weaving she will either be from this town or she came here to be trained." Although this is not strictly true, since as we have seen there are now quite large



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numbers of young women learning to weave in these other towns, it was the case that the only female 'master' weaver active in Ọyọ by 1996 is a Ẓakí woman. Mrs. Lawal is one of the oldest generation of Ẓakí women weavers having begun her apprenticeship in 1967. Another member of this same age group has played a key role in the spread of aṣọ òkè weaving among women in the Odò Ọnà district of Ìbàdàn. Mrs. Ronke Salawu, who is in her late forties, came to weave in Ìbàdàn from Ẓakí during the 1970s. In the area near her workshop there are numerous other small groups of women weavers, many of which were either trained directly by Mrs. Salawu or were in turn trained by one of her former apprentices. Mrs. Salawu is also something of a technological innovator in that she has had a metal loom frame constructed for her, a development that was copied by one of her former apprentices

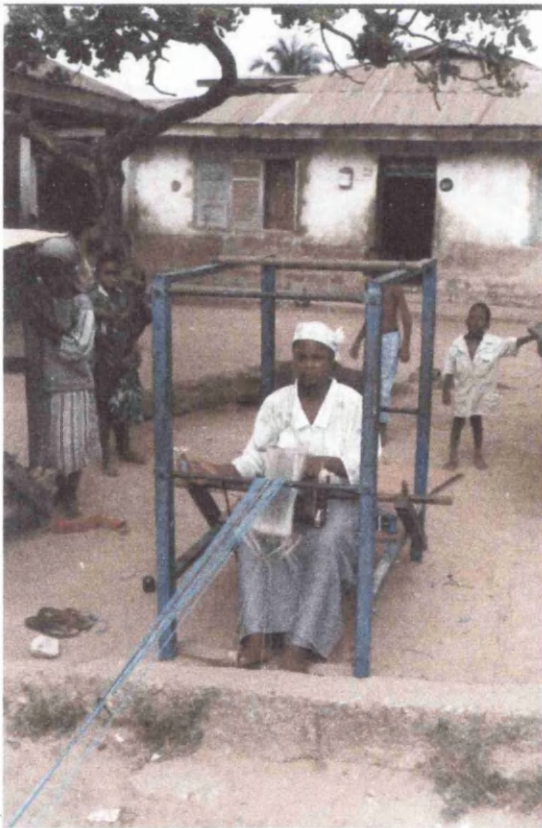


Figure 31: Mrs Ronke Salawu, one of the leading women weavers of Odò Ọnà district of Ìbàdàn, weaving in the metal-framed loom she designed, 1996.

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In the course of surveying the women weavers of Ìbàdàn it became apparent that it was possible to trace back many of the current generation of weavers like this, moving either directly, or indirectly, to a comparatively small number of initiators. However, unlike Mrs. Salawu, most of these women came from the eastern part of the Yorùbá region. It is when we turn to this area that the issue of government intervention in the weaving industry during the colonial period becomes important.

### **The Textile Development Scheme:**

The Textile Development Scheme was a programme throughout the colony of Nigeria begun in the mid-1940s by the Department of Commerce and Industries, with the intention of introducing new technology for both spinning and weaving. It was hoped that these new technologies would rapidly supplant the existing equipment thus enabling the indigenous weaving industry to survive what was perceived as the threat of imminent extinction due to industrial imports. The scheme was to pave the way for the industrialization of parts of the local industry by upgrading the skills of the work force, whilst establishing the remainder with more viable technology for small-scale local use<sup>26</sup>. A secondary and often conflicting aim was to assist in the provision of employment opportunities for ex-soldiers who had been promised assistance when demobilized at the conclusion of the war. Two Textile Training Centres were opened at Adó Èkìtì and Òyó during 1947, with others following at Auchi in 1948, in Aba, Kano, and Sokoto in 1949, and Ìlórín in 1950. The sites were selected as areas where weaving was an important industry and there was good access to local supplies of cotton. The stated purpose of the centres was to study "indigenous methods of cloth production, to introduce improved equipment and new techniques, and to train spinners, weavers, and dyers to use them"<sup>27</sup>.

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From a historical perspective one of the more interesting aspects of the Textile Development Scheme was that it attempted to impose basically the same technology and labour organization package - male weavers using European hand looms supplied by female spinners using wheels - throughout Nigeria in areas where there was a wide variety of different local histories of weaving technology and gender division of labour. A full history of the scheme that would assess the diversity of results in the different areas remains to be written<sup>28</sup>, but in the Yorùbá-speaking region alone a marked regional variation in long-term impact is apparent. The centre in Òyó, where the dominant tradition was of male double-heddle loom weavers working in a compound-based organization of labour with female spinners and dyers, had, as I have discussed elsewhere (Clarke 1996), a negligible impact in both the long and the short term on the weaving industry in the town. The same is true of the Ìlórín centre which was closed after only a few years (Olaoye 1993:343-380). In Adó Èkìtì however, and elsewhere in the east of the Yorùbá area<sup>29</sup>, where the dominant craft was women's single-heddle loom weaving<sup>30</sup>, a similar failure in the short term masks a growing role in the last few years for the weaving technology introduced by the training centres. It is however, a new generation of women weavers who are taking up the European looms, not the men who were trained in the early years of the centres.

The press release issued on the occasion of the opening of the Adó centre in March 1947 is characteristic of the paternalistic air that typified the entire venture. "The industry, as many people in Nigeria are aware has, up to now, lacked the knowledge, as it has lacked the equipment necessary to enable it to produce the kinds of cloth required by Nigerians today. Happily it need no longer want for this knowledge and it will have an opportunity of judging the value of better methods and of improved equipment"<sup>31</sup>.

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The centre was to take on twenty weavers and thirty spinners at a time, the weavers recruited both from ex-servicemen and other interested men from throughout the region, the spinners from among local women. Two types of loom were in use. A large foot-operated four-shaft loom was built after designs used in hand weaving in England. One former trainee of the Òyó centre recalled seeing a small scale model of the loom made in palm-rib, sent for copying in Nigeria, probably from Achimota College in Accra<sup>32</sup>. This type was referred to as a “standard loom.” A smaller, more simple, device with only two harnesses, which was called the “plain loom” was designed by one of the textile officers at Òyó. The advantages of the latter were that it was cheaper to build, easier to use, and more suitable for operation within the confined space of local houses. Although a wide variety of more complex loom types were experimented with during the life of the scheme, including looms with flying shuttles and simple power looms, these original two models were the mainstay of the programme and are still the two forms of loom commonly found today. Except where a distinction is relevant we will refer to both as European looms or broad looms. Another local name is simply “big loom.”

A wide range of cloths was woven. At least some of the trainees were taught to weave a number of relatively complex twills, herringbone, diamond, and rib weaves, using the standard loom. As its name suggests, the plain loom, having only a single pair of heddles, was restricted to the production of simpler, mostly plain weave, designs. The choice of design was clearly closely bound up with the intended market, and a degree of confusion rapidly emerged on this issue. There were three options that became apparent<sup>33</sup>. The first was to weave the more heavy, complicated, and expensive European-inspired designs and rely on a market for the cloth as furnishing fabrics, curtains, suits, etc. In this case the potential customers would be limited to Europeans and the then relatively small number of wealthy Nigerians. The second option was to weave

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lighter and more simple European-inspired designs that could be sold locally for such uses as bed sheets and school uniforms. Thirdly, the products of the indigenous hand weaving industry could be imitated, with the hope of reaching the same market for ceremonial and festive dress.

The initial response to the new technology from local officials was enthusiastic and many local authorities were eager to encourage smaller-scale training programmes in their own towns. Most notable in the region with which we are concerned was the establishment of a centre funded by the Native Authority in Ọwọ in 1946-7<sup>34</sup>, and the smaller weaving centre established by the Atáọja of Ọṣogbo. Other town authorities, or in some cases weavers' societies, sponsored individuals to attend the centres in Adó or Ọyọ with the intention that they would pass on the new technique in their home town on completing their training.

However it was soon apparent that the rapid technology substitution envisaged by the promoters of the scheme was not going to occur<sup>35</sup>. By 1950 some 300 trainees were graduating from the centres each year but very few of these were continuing in the trade. The annual report<sup>36</sup> four years later put the total number of European looms in operation in the Western Region at only 120, of which 35 were associated with the centre at Adó Èkìtì. The total amount of cloth woven in the year on all these looms was estimated at 10,414 yards, an insignificant figure by comparison with total cloth consumption (in 1940 for example Nigeria imported over 79 million square yards of cotton cloth<sup>37</sup>.) Despite optimistic reports this failure was apparent to the officials involved - as early as 1950 one of the Department of Commerce and Industries textile officers commented in an internal memo<sup>38</sup> that "they do not now believe that hand weaving on a large scale with paid employees can be economic. They considered that the large scale enterprise can succeed only with power looms."

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The major reasons for the lack of success of the scheme may be summarized as generally inappropriate recruits, inadequate training, inappropriate technology, and lack of a secure market for the new styles of cloth. In the crucial early years of the scheme all the centres suffered from being obliged to train large numbers of poorly motivated ex-servicemen with no previous knowledge of or interest in the weaving industry. Most of these servicemen felt that they had been promised permanent government employment on a regular wage, perhaps as instructors of weaving, and were not prepared to take on the obvious risks of establishing a business in an untried industry. This led to frequent complaints from the Europeans involved, of which the remark in a report<sup>39</sup> by the textile officer at Adó in 1948, that they “expect high wages for doing nothing ” is typical. It should be noted however that a small number of ex-servicemen were among the most successful of the graduates from the centres. In Òyó, for example, Deacon Falodun, an ex-army man who was among the first batch of trainees in 1946, could still be found in his weaving workshop in the town fifty years later in 1996<sup>40</sup>. The high dropout rate among ex-servicemen led to the decision in 1951 that the centres should concentrate on training men and women who were already experienced weavers on the local looms.

Soon after the centres commenced operation it became apparent that the three month courses were far too short to enable the weavers to operate without supervision. Although weaving apprenticeships in England were normally for at least two years, Southern, the official overseeing the scheme was anxious for quick results and felt that extending training to six months would be sufficient<sup>41</sup>. Knibb, the Textile Officer at Adó, was clearly already concerned enough while the first course was in progress in 1948 to propose that the best of the weavers be kept on for a further three months to “be trained in weaving expensive cloths such as carpets, Jacquard brocades and furnishings with

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which they would permanently be able to compete with the traditional weavers,” despite his endorsement earlier in the same memo of the official optimism that all the “traditional weavers” would have taken up the new looms within six months<sup>42</sup>. Even this longer period however was inadequate - Falodun found it necessary to stay on without pay at the centre in Òyó for a total of fifteen months before he had mastered the entire range of techniques. The majority of trainees however, left after the short course only able to produce plain weave cloths, and therefore unable to exploit any design advantages the new technology possessed.

Despite the initial intention to “study indigenous methods of cloth production” the officials involved in carrying out the scheme, most of whom were technicians recruited from the weaving industry in the UK, took it for granted that the imported equipment was indeed technologically superior to indigenous methods, and even when colonial officials did examine the organization of the local industry they were unprepared to consider the possibility that the local methods were in fact more efficient in their adaptation to local conditions. One of the key ways in which the new technology was not appropriate for the local conditions was the high capital outlay necessary to establish a weaving business using the European-designed looms. Although the various Native Administrations, the Department of Commerce and Industry itself, and the agency responsible for ex-servicemen, were all prepared to make short-term loans, virtually all the trainees still lacked adequate funds. A single loom cost in the region of £8, while the textile officer’s opinion was that a balanced production unit should consist of ten looms, plus a warping drum and creel and a variety of subsidiary equipment. If local thread was to be used, provision would be needed for 8 - 10 spinners per loom, i.e. a total of 80 - 100 women<sup>43</sup>. It is hardly surprising that few trainees were willing or able to take on an enterprise on this scale, in what was after all an untried industry.

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To these problems were added the lack of a secure local market for the cloth that was woven on the new looms. Officials at the D.C.I. promoted the centres vigorously and succeeded in obtaining a number of orders from a wide range of sources for furnishing fabrics, curtains, table cloths etc. However local Residents were soon pointing out that the priority given to these orders such as one from a British MP and one from an American lady, meant that local customers were subject to endless delays. The vital early opportunity to establish a local customer base had been sacrificed in the interest of prestige orders generated within the colonial system. Moreover these orders were sold at very low prices, with the result that payments to weavers were too low to attract qualified recruits. The Resident of Òyó Province summed up these problems in a letter<sup>44</sup> to the D.C.I. in May 1952, when he noted, in comments that apply equally to the centre at Adó : “We have therefore failed in our first objective, which was to encourage local industries for local markets. We are failing totally in this (presumed) bid for “export” market. We could never fulfill orders because of the impossibility of recruiting more people to this if not sweated at least underpaid industry.”

Although many of those directly involved attributed the failure of the scheme to achieve the expected transformation to a lack of dedication and hard work on the part of the trainees, at least one official came close to recognizing that much of the difficulty resulted from its failure to address the social organization of textile production<sup>45</sup>: “My information on weaving is limited but I cannot avoid the conclusion that the rural textile centres represent a genuine attempt by Government to improve an indigenous craft and this attempt has failed. It has failed because the improvement over the indigenous weaving technique offered by the weaving centres is too slight to effect a widespread change in the craft. The traditional technique appears to offer employment to all members of the family in a way that the more advanced technique does not,



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and so affords as large a profit to the family unit as does the improved technique where only the trained members are engaged.”

### **The Impact of the Textile Development Scheme in Oñdó Province:**

Although the Textile Development Scheme comprehensively failed to achieve the rapid and large-scale transformation of textile production technology expected by its proponents, it nevertheless contributed in ways largely unanticipated by the colonial authorities to the ongoing processes of change in the weaving industry in the region set in motion by the wider impact of social change in the mid-twentieth century<sup>46</sup>. These changes have culminated in the 1990s with ever growing numbers of young women in the eastern Yorùbá-speaking region taking up *aşo òkè* weaving, and in a significant minority of this new generation of weavers using the European looms introduced 50 years earlier by the Textile Development Scheme. In turn many of these weavers have migrated to Ìbàdàn and are a major factor in spreading weaving among the women of the city.

In marked contrast to the continued vitality of *aşo òkè* weaving, the long tradition of women's weaving on the upright single-heddle loom that was the economic mainstay of the eastern Yorùbá in the nineteenth century is now effectively defunct. Although it is possible to find a few elderly women who still maintain their looms and weave occasionally, the only active single-heddle loom weavers in most Yorùbá towns are Èbìrà migrants from the Okene area<sup>47</sup>. In the 1950s and 60s the majority of Yorùbá women weavers abandoned the craft to pursue other more lucrative occupations. Accounts that ascribe the decline of women's weaving to the displacement of a domestic craft supplying household clothing needs by the influx of imported textiles are over simplistic. Recent research by Elisha Renne (1992, 1997) and Colleen Kriger (1993) has

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indicated that much of the production of women's looms was intended for market sale (as indeed is indicated by far earlier evidence of the large-scale coastal trade in locally-woven textiles from the sixteenth century.) The reasons why Yorùbá women abandoned their looms are more complex and include the opening up of education to girls following the introduction of free primary education (and consequently a shortage of hand-spun thread as daughters and wards had other demands on their time), increased trading opportunities for women in the more remote regions following new road building and the spread of motor transport, and the loss of important markets (Renne 1992). Although changing taste towards more lightweight imported textiles was also an important factor, even garments such as hand-woven baby ties for which there is continuing demand are now woven elsewhere (mostly in Okene.)

Against the background of this precipitate decline in local textile production, which went unacknowledged in contemporary official documents, the officials involved in the Textile Development Scheme refocused their efforts in the face of the failure discussed above. While much of the attention of the Department of Commerce and Industries shifted to the promotion of mechanized textile production on an industrialized scale in Lagos and Kano, the training centre at Adó remained operational until it was absorbed into the Government Technical College. The response of the Textile Officer at Adó took three directions, all of which are significant in the light of recent developments. Firstly recruitment of weavers at the centre was opened up to include women. Secondly graduates were organized into small cooperative groups that could be supervised from the centre. Thirdly the focus was switched to the weaving of cloth styles for which there was a recognized local market.

Renne (1993) has drawn attention to the problematic interplay of local and European gender stereotypes that underlay the centre's efforts to recruit

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women. Despite the initial emphasis on ex-servicemen, the retraining of women weavers was clearly implied by the aim of transforming the local weaving technology. Although, as Renne (*ibid*) notes, Knibb claimed that his view of womens' weaving as a domestic "spare time" occupation was shared locally and prevented adequate numbers of women coming forward for training<sup>48</sup> - "Our new type of weaving is also considered to be rather too superior for the housewife and for prestige sake, women are discouraged by local custom", elsewhere<sup>49</sup> he expressed concern that women would be more effective weavers than the men. "So far the policy has been here to find lucrative work for the ex-servicemen against the local weavers: This policy I propose to change but try to find suitable difficult and expensive cloths for men to weave but even on these styles I foresee that women will eventually oust them."

Many of the graduates of the Adó centre went back to their towns or villages and attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to establish a business with the support of small loans, but the most successful venture was a cooperative of weavers established on the site of the training centre under official supervision<sup>50</sup>. Although it was noted in May 1951<sup>51</sup> that this group, the Community Weavers Cooperative, had outstanding orders from the Government Lodge, Cameroons, and the Residence of the Commissioner for the Colony, the bulk of their work was now in reproducing local designs. The Annual Report for 1951<sup>52</sup> claimed the group "is making good progress and is selling cloth of traditional design of very good quality and at a lower price than weavers working on frames [i.e. upright single-heddle looms] and narrow strip looms." By 1954, when as we have noted above there were 35 European looms at work in Oñdó Province, increased production was being attributed to growing local demand for the cloth, of which the report<sup>53</sup> commented "the striped cloth produced on broad looms in the West retains the dignity and

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interest of design which is typical of the best Yoruba cloth.” Although as elsewhere some weavers were subsequently able to obtain a limited amount of work over the following decades supplying cloth for uniforms to local institutions such as schools and prisons, it was this successful, albeit small-scale, movement into the market for the products of the indigenous looms that established a viable base for the new technology in the eastern Yorùbá area. Since there were relatively few double-heddle loom weavers in the region it was possible for these weavers to satisfy part of the local demand for *aṣọ òkè* in competition with traders buying cloth at the markets in Ìbàdàn and Lagos.

In addition to the weavers who were trained at the centre in Adó, the spread of looms of European design in the region was boosted by numerous smaller scale initiatives by missions, schools, prisons, and other colonial institutions. From the time of the earliest missionary involvement in the Yorùbá-speaking region European visitors, although often recognizing the quality and durability of locally-woven cloth, had been struck by what they perceived to be the obvious inefficiency of weaving in narrow strips. As early as 1849 the CMS missionary David Hinderer, himself a former weaver, wrote<sup>54</sup> from Abẹ̀òkúta to his London headquarters: “As there are so many weavers here and I still remember the time when I myself shook my weavers shuttle in my native place, I sometimes stand and talk to them, not only about that most precious cloth, which Christ wrought out for them on Calvary, but also about a superior and more advantageous mode of weaving, which we could teach them by and by.” In the nineteenth century the CMS mission and its backers were more concerned to promote the colony as a cotton exporting centre and Hinderer’s proposal appears not to have been taken up. In the first half of the twentieth century, though, various experiments with “improved” looms were undertaken, and it was interest by colonial officials in promoting these that

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lead to the Textile Development Scheme. In the eastern part of the Yorùbá-speaking region a report<sup>55</sup> by the Cooperative Office in 1944 referred to looms in use at the Methodist Mission in Iléṣà, the Native Court in Oka, and the Native Authority offices in Ikàré.

The best known of these independent initiatives was the experiments in adapting local arts to the needs of Christian missions undertaken by the Catholic Society of African Missions (S.M.A.) at Oye Èkìtì under the direction of Father Kevin Carroll. Established in 1947 the centre engaged leather workers, bead workers and weavers, as well as the carvers for which it became famous (Carroll 1967:3). At first the existing textile technology was utilized in producing church textiles that drew on the design traditions of *aṣo òkè* and of women's upright loom weaving, but in the course of the 1950s a variety of looms of European design were introduced<sup>56</sup>. As well as working with trainees and experienced weavers at the centre, weaving was included in the curriculum of the school run by the S.M.A. in the town<sup>57</sup>.

There were therefore a significant number of institutions in the eastern Yorùbá region seeking to promote the spread of new methods of weaving, of which the continued presence through various organizational incarnations of the centre at Adó was only the most important. Moreover those ex-trainees of these workshops who did manage to establish sustainable businesses, although mostly on a more modest scale than that expected by the colonial officials, returned to more familiar organizational patterns, passing on their skills via two or three year apprenticeships. The newly qualified weavers were able to draw on the labour of a pool of carpenters who had been trained at the Adó centre to manufacture the new style of looms. Apart from the long metal reeds these could be made entirely of local parts. This skill too could be passed on via apprenticeship to a younger generation in towns where there was sufficient demand.

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Elisha Renne (1997) has discussed the circumstances that have led to a revival of weaving by a new generation of women in the Èkìtì area. She draws attention to many of the same economic incentives that we have discussed in relation to the situation of young women school leavers in Ìbàdàn, but also points to the relative novelty in the area of both the European form of looms and the older double-heddle narrow-strip looms, giving them an appeal as a “modern” occupation suitable for educated women. She highlights the contrast with the old-fashioned image of the discarded single-heddle weaving technology now associated with elderly and generally illiterate rural women. She also notes the persistence in the eastern parts of the Yorùbá region of the old established gender stereotype that weaving is women’s work rather than men’s. In 1992 she interviewed twenty seven weavers in five Èkìtì towns. All but two of the weavers were women, as were all of their fifty-nine apprentices<sup>58</sup>. About one third of the weavers were using looms of European design, while the remainder were using double-heddle narrow strip looms. Among the women was one who had trained at the centre in Adó in 1950.

Research in Oñdó a few years earlier seems to indicate a similar picture (Akinlami 1989). Female double-heddle loom weaving and weaving on European broadlooms were reported to be spreading rapidly in the city since the first workshop was established in 1976 by a woman from Adó. The former apprentices of this weaver, who was herself trained by a man in her home town, were now running the majority of weaving centres in the area<sup>59</sup>. In Iléṣà, where observations in 1997 suggests the number of women using European looms far outnumbers those working on the narrow-strip loom, it is also possible to make a direct connection to the Adó centre. Among the oldest weavers in the town is a man in his 80s who was among the first group of trainees at Adó. He concentrated on the production of school and prison uniforms until these orders ended in the mid-1960s, when he switched to the

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weaving of *aşo òkè*<sup>60</sup>. Over the years he has trained numerous women weavers, including his wife, who now runs a workshop with ten looms in the town of *Ìpètú-ìjẹṣà*, and his daughter.

### From *Şakí* and *Èkìtì* to *Ìbàdàn*:

As we talked to more and more women weavers in *Ìbàdàn*, and in particular when we asked women who had trained them, it soon became apparent that behind the present generation of women in their mid to late twenties lies a relatively small group of older women who pioneered the recent dramatic expansion of the craft. With few exceptions these women are not natives of *Ìbàdàn* but migrants from *Şakí*, or more commonly, from the eastern *Yorùbá* area. Among the latter we find the women who have done much to promote the belated spread of European broad looms in *Ìbàdàn*<sup>61</sup>.

Mrs. Wemimo Ogunkunle, the daughter of the *Ilẹṣà* weaver mentioned in the previous section, has a workshop spread over three lockup shops (see photo on following page) in the *Òrẹmẹjì* district of *Ìbàdàn*, with another shop on the campus of *Ìbàdàn* Polytechnic. She was taught to weave by her father while she was a teenager. After completing her schooling in *Ilẹṣà* she worked for seven years as a clerk at the Polytechnic while she saved sufficient capital to establish her business on the scale she wanted<sup>62</sup>. At the time of the interview in 1995 she had eight apprentices, but was keen to recruit more as they were insufficient to operate all the 13 looms she owned. All her looms are of the smaller “plain loom” type. Although she still kept the sample books of her father’s work and knew how to weave some of the more complex designs they contained, like all the broad loom weavers in *Ìbàdàn* the mainstay of her business was in weaving *aşo òkè*. Trained apprentices could weave an area of cloth equivalent to a woman’s “complete” in between three and five days<sup>63</sup>. As

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with aṣọ òkè woven on the double-heddle loom the cloths combined cotton, rayon, and lurex. Plain warp striped designs were most common, but weft floats inserted by hand were also woven. It was usual to give the cloths the effect of having been woven in four inch wide strips by leaving a gap of two or three warp threads every four inches - this produced a line down the cloth which could be left to mimic the seam in stitched narrow strips, or cut so that the cloths could be re-sewn along the edges if desired. Although this effect was not done on all cloths it was the standard procedure with aṣọ òkè<sup>64</sup> woven on European looms in the city.



Figure 32: An apprentice at work on a European loom in one of the workshops operated by Mrs Ogunkunle, Ìbàdàn, 1995.

While this emphasis on imitating the products of narrow strip looms indicates that the old problem of establishing a viable local market for cloth that would fully exploit the technological potential of the European looms has been avoided rather than resolved, it was also clear from discussions with Mrs. Ogunkunle that the other drawbacks that had emerged fifty years ago were still significant. Although the trainees received a three year apprenticeship they



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were only taught to weave a relatively limited range of designs (this was also true of other workshops where the equipment was the more sophisticated “standard loom.”) Mrs. Ogunkunle attributed her current shortage of apprentices to the high capital costs of the broad looms compared to the narrow-strip double-heddle technology. At 1995 prices it would cost, according to her estimate, about N 10,000 (then circa US \$125) to purchase a broad loom, warping creel, and other necessary equipment for a graduating apprentice. This compares with around N 1000 for a double-heddle loom. It was even more difficult for newly “free” apprentices to obtain this sum than it had been for graduates of the training centres in the 1940 since official loans are no longer available. Mrs. Ogunkunle attempts to resolve this problem by encouraging the parents of her apprentices to purchase the necessary equipment bit by bit over the last year of the training period. Finally, despite the apparent advantages of weaving a broad piece of cloth, the European loom is not as fast as the narrow-strip double heddle loom, taking three to five days for a good apprentice to weave a “complete”, compared with 2 to 3 days using the older technology.

Since it would seem that given the relative disadvantages of the European loom it is still not an appropriate technology for the region, the question arises of why the technique is spreading at all. Renne (1997:783) noted that it benefited from the perception that it was “modern”, and that this exercised an attraction on potential recruits. Similar ideas were expressed by one woman who had been told to become a weaver by her father because he wanted someone to keep alive a traditional occupation of the family, but had not been interested until he had sent her to train on the European loom in Ikòlé. More importantly however, most potential trainees or their parents lack sufficient information to make the kind of relative evaluation of the two alternative technologies we have attempted. The European loom, despite its

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disadvantages, remains visibly a viable occupation, demonstrated locally by the women who continue to practise it with some success. These women, who depend on a continued flow of apprentices both for the fees (around N 1000 each) they bring, and to operate their looms, clearly have no interest in discouraging recruits. There was however some evidence that the proprietors themselves had recognized the relative inefficiency of the larger looms. It was noticeable that of the eight proprietors among the fifty surveyed in Ìbàdàn who had European looms, six<sup>65</sup> also had narrow-strip double-heddle looms in their workshops. In several cases, including one woman living along the Òyó road who had learnt from Mrs. Ogunkunle, and another nearby who she had taught in turn, their broadlooms were covered up and no longer used while they trained new apprentices on the double-heddle loom.

An additional factor promoting the spread of European looms is continuing government intervention in the weaving industry. This remains almost entirely orientated towards the imported technology rather than the indigenous. The two major recent government initiatives which have touched on the weaving industry are the 1987 Better Life For Rural Women Programme (BLP) initiated by the wife of former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida, and the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). The BLP was “designed to revive rural women’s income generating activities and mobilize them for group action ” (Afonja and Aina 1995:29). As part of this activity it sponsored numerous small centres in villages to promote craft activities, including training women in the use of European hand looms. In Òwò the Rural Womens Centre was reported to be an important factor in spreading broad loom weaving (Agun 1991:43). Despite some achievements however the BLP suffered from a lack of regular funding and organization, relying instead on sporadic initiatives by the wives of state governors, and on annual fairs supposed to display the products of the centres, which the Guardian

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newspaper (27/3/1990) dismissed as “a farrago of pretentious self-congratulatory speeches, ostentatious displays of fashion and sheer profligacy, all garnished with a few sad-looking bundles of mats.” None of the women surveyed in Ìbàdàn had received any assistance from the BLP, although one reported having sold some cloth at an event organized by the related Family Support Programme.

Of slightly greater significance is the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), set up in 1986 to combat the growing youth unemployment problem that resulted from the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme. It aimed to provide unemployed youths with marketable skills that would lead to self-employment (Okunola 1993). The relevant section of the NDE is the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme which attempted to place eligible youths in apprenticeship schemes in over fifty different trades, including cloth weaving. The NDE was supposed to pay the relevant fees and monitor the trainees to ensure that they received adequate training and completed their assigned programme. In total some 8,789 apprentices were placed throughout Òyó State between 1987 and 1990, of whom 4,618 completed their allotted training (ibid).

In the course of surveying weavers in Ìbàdàn we found limited evidence of the impact of the NDE<sup>66</sup>. Only two weaving proprietors, Mrs. Ogunkunle and Mrs. Adebayo, had had trainees placed with them under the scheme, although in the case of Mrs. Adebayo she was sent about forty young women between 1987 and 1991. Both reported that since 1992 contacts with the NDE officials had declined, few payments had been received and the programme seemed to have lost momentum. Another respondent was among those that the NDE had sent to Mrs. Adebayo, while a fourth woman had been sent to learn broadloom weaving in the Art department of Ìbàdàn Polytechnic. The major problem with the scheme during its most active years was that it

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required both the proprietors and the parents of potential trainees to complete several long application forms and to deal with official bureaucracy. Mrs. Adebayo, herself a former civil servant, and Mrs. Ogunkunle, a former clerk at the Polytechnic, were unusual in being willing and able to do this. Most women weavers are less literate and well-informed, and they simply did not know of the scheme's existence<sup>67</sup>.

### **Conclusions: Women, design, and discrimination.**

At the outset of this chapter it was suggested that current developments in the *aṣọ òkè* weaving industry mark a historical shift from gender complementarity in cloth production to increasing competition. This competition is manifest in the exponential growth in the number of women weavers over recent years, but is presently masked by differences in the marketing strategy of male and female weavers. This different method of marketing in turn has reduced any design impact from the new source of recruitment, and has muted potential male hostility.

The number of women weavers in *Ìbàdàn* appears to be growing at an extremely rapid rate. Although we lack comprehensive statistics, it is clear that relatively few women were weaving as recently as the mid-1980s. These were mostly women from *Ṣakí* or from the eastern *Yorùbá* area, with a significant minority of the latter utilizing broad looms of European design. The former apprentices of these women, mostly now in their mid-twenties and becoming free in the years around 1990, constitute the majority of the proprietors of weaving establishments in the city today. These women in turn are each training, as we saw, an average of seven apprentices at any one time. We can identify two key structural factors, in addition to the persistence of beliefs about weaving as women's work<sup>68</sup>, that are promoting this rapid rate of growth.

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Firstly, the number of women becoming weavers is augmented by those trained by men within weaving families or sent as apprentices to male master weavers.



Figure 32: A number of the women weaving proprietors from the Àrẹ̀mọ̀ area of Ibàdàn, including Alhaja Oloruntobi (second from right), May 1996.

In Òyó Town, where there is only one female weaving proprietor, some ten percent of the total weaving population is female, and this represents a considerably higher proportion of young trainees. A similar or higher percentage of female participation is apparent in the small but long-established male weaving districts in the old part of Ìbàdàn. So significant numbers of women are being trained by male master weavers but female weavers do not, as a rule, train male apprentices. As we saw there was only one boy among the total of 348 apprentices in training with the fifty women proprietors surveyed. This imbalance is due to the unwillingness of parents to apprentice their sons to women weavers rather than a deliberate policy of only accepting female recruits.

Secondly, there is some evidence that the career paths of the new women weavers differ significantly from those followed by young men in the older weaving communities. In the weaving compounds of Ìsẹ̀yìn, Ìlọ́rín, or

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Ọyọ most weavers are young men in their teens, while most master weavers are around forty or older. As we saw at Ilé Èkejọ in Ọyọ, male weavers who have completed their training are usually encouraged to break away and attempt to achieve financial independence. In a few cases this involves setting up a weaving business, but more often they will try to pursue some other career, sometimes with the intention of returning to establish themselves as master weavers after a decade or more when they have accumulated substantial capital. While they are waiting for an appropriate opportunity, or if they are unlucky in their first venture, they may return to weaving on a dependent basis taking in thread from their old master or other master weavers. At times a favourite son of the master weaver may stay in the business as his father's assistant, while some young men who lack the motivation or opportunity for independence may weave on a dependent basis through their twenties. Even those few who decide to work directly at establishing their weaving business may do so, as in the case of several men we discussed in the previous chapter, by building up a network of weavers among less entrepreneurial men of their own age. In general it could be said that for most young men in weaving compounds weaving is something to fall back on, and perhaps a long-term destiny, whereas for the women we have been discussing it is a positive career choice. The effect of all these alternative career paths is that very few male weavers take on apprentices before they reach their mid to late thirties<sup>69</sup>, while female weavers begin to do so in their early twenties.

Clearly if these trends are sustained the rate of increase in the number of women weaving aṣọ òkè will be substantially higher than that of men, and women will pose an ever increasing competitive threat to male dominance of cloth production. At present the extent of this threat is masked because women weavers are compelled to adopt a marketing strategy that does not rely on the main organized network for aṣọ òkè sales. The details of this network will be

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discussed in the next chapter. Here we need only note that most male master weavers attend one or two of the three major wholesale cloth markets held on sixteen day cycles at Aráòmí in Òyó, Òjé in Ìbàdàn, and Èdè. At these markets they negotiate orders with the wholesale cloth traders, most of whom are women, as well as selling cloth from their stocks to the occasional cash buyer. At Aráòmí market only one of the weaving proprietors selling aṣọ òkè is a woman<sup>70</sup>. The numerous women selling cloth at Òjé are traders rather than weavers. Although the organization of these markets is controlled by the male master weavers there is no evidence that women are specifically excluded.

Rather than taking cloth to sell at the wholesale markets the women weavers of Ìbàdàn and other towns in the eastern and southern Yorùbá areas rely on direct sales to networks of customers built up through personal and family ties, largely within their immediate neighbourhoods. The weavers use the deposits placed on these orders as their main source of working capital. It is their lack of other sources of capital, and hence their inability to build up stocks of cloth to display, that is the major reason why women weavers do not bother to attend the cloth markets. Many of the poorer male weavers also stay away from the markets, although some attend as much for social contacts with other weavers as for any possible sales. Thus the exclusion of women from the major cloth distribution network is due not to specific discrimination by the male market authorities but to more diffuse gender-related inequalities in access to capital (discussed in general terms by Aina 1995:99). Moreover, those women who do have access to significant amounts of capital are more likely to take up the more lucrative career of a wholesale cloth trader than become a weaver.

When some evidence of direct discrimination against women weavers was apparent, it came not from male master weavers but from the female wholesale cloth traders. None of these women that were interviewed admitted

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to buying *aşo òkè* from women weavers. In general they concentrate their orders on the major master weavers of *Ìséyìn* and *Ìlòrìn*. Although there are sound business reasons for doing this (page 241 below), we were also frequently told that women did not know how to weave good cloth<sup>71</sup>. This becomes something of a self-reinforcing prophecy, in terms of design, if not quality of weaving, because it is primarily the major traders who mediate design change as we will see in the following chapters. Since they are excluded from business with these traders, women weavers are, like the weavers in more remote towns, usually some way behind the latest styles. Contrary to what one might expect therefore, these new recruits to the *aşo òkè* industry have lagged rather than led the rapid design change of the 1990s.

Together with a proverb that has been cited in support of the idea of flexible gender roles, this chapter was introduced with the more provocative comments of an *Ìséyìn* master weaver<sup>72</sup>. The proverb he cited - "*Kò já, òbọ kọ hun. Tí kò bá şe wípé ó n já òbọ lè hun şọ*" (If it didn't break the monkey could weave. If it wasn't for the thread breaking monkeys would be able to weave) - refers to the difficulty of weaving irregular hand-spun thread. Machine-spun thread, by comparison, runs smoothly through the heddles, and is therefore much easier and faster to weave. The claim he was making was that women were only able to weave because of the introduction of the much easier hand-spun thread. Although he probably did not intend the remarks to be as offensive as they sound, they are typical of the patronizing air that marked male master weavers' comments on the influx of women into the industry. Women weavers are not yet taken seriously as a source of competition. At present master weavers in the old weaving compounds can see immediate benefits in the additional source of much needed apprentices, but the extent of orders that are lost via direct sales from women weavers to customers is less apparent. If, as I have suggested, on present trends the rapidly growing number



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of women weavers will present an ever increasing competitive challenge to the heartland of *aşo òkè* weaving, attitudes in the future may perhaps become more strained and hostile.

### Notes:

1. This role is analogous, with certain differences that will become clear, to that of male “master weavers” described in the previous chapter. There is no local term for female weaving proprietors - although they would be referred to simply as weavers (*ahunşo*) or, more respectfully if they were older than the speaker, as “mother of looms” (*Ìyá olófi*). Their apprentices address them as “Ma”.
2. Interviews: Alhaja Mariamo Oloruntobi, Àrẹmọ district, Ìbàdàn, 22/2/1996, 10/5/1997
3. See P.C.Lloyd et al. (eds.) 1967.
4. See D.Aronson 1978 for Ìjẹbu Yorùbá migrants, and A.Cohen 1969 for Hausa.
5. Resources did not permit me to undertake the massive task of systematically surveying the weavers of Ìbàdàn, which is a maze of unmapped tracks and alleys extending over a vast area, many accessible only on foot, with a population of up to ten million. The following account is based on impressions gathered over numerous days spent visiting and talking to women weavers throughout the city, plus a brief unscientific survey of 50 women weavers conducted in early 1996. The results of this survey should be taken only as a rough guide to a changing situation.
6. See Denzer 1995:28-31 for an account of the history of the seamstress trade in Nigeria.
7. Other names recorded included “Ori Ire Weaving Institute” (ie good fortune), “Blessing Weaving Centre”, “Lady Charity Weaving Centre”, “Twins

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Weaving Institute”, “Omowumi Weaving Centre” (i.e. Children please me) plus several named after the proprietor such as “Barakat Weaving Institute”, “Oluwaṣeun Weaving Centre”, “Oloruntobi Weaving Institute”. Many Yorùbá names, such as the last two, also translate as prayers - ‘we thank God’ and ‘God is great.’ The imaginatively named “Busy Fingers Art Institute” was run by a weaver with a uncharacteristically complex career background - see note 10 below.

8. The only exception to this I encountered was a woman in Ìsẹ̀yìn who had learnt to weave in her family compound in the early 1980s and managed a small number of looms there alongside other master weavers from the family.

9. Since the survey was completed Oṅdó State has been split, forming a new Èkìtì State, with its capital at Adó.

10. The civil servant, Mrs. Adebayo, was an exceptional figure in many respects. A woman of about forty, she was a native of Ogbómòṣó, where her mother had woven on the upright single-heddle loom. Mrs. Adebayo claimed to have taught herself to weave, drawing on memories of watching her mother, while she was working at the State Cultural Centre in Ìbàdàn. She attended a workshop on weaving in the United States in 1982, and a course on broad loom weaving at Ìbàdàn Polytechnic in 1986. The latter was run by Mr. Amole, a graduate of the Òyó Textile Training Centre. Although this is an atypical career Mrs. Adebayo was a key figure in the spread of women’s weaving in the city, training more than fifty apprentices between 1987 and 1991 when she ran the Busy Fingers Art Institute on Old Ifẹ̀ Road. Since moving to her present location she has scaled down her business apparently after finding it was difficult to obtain apprentices in the more up-market area. However she still has three young women working in her courtyard. Three earlier graduates of Busy Fingers were among the other women surveyed.

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11. This is a marked contrast to attitudes reported in the 1960s, when, for example Callaway (1964:69), noted that weaving was regarded as old fashioned and was one of the least popular and highly regarded choices for apprenticeship. For a more general view of the problems facing women in the urban labour market in Nigeria see Aina 1995.

12. This was meant literally, referring to some form of divination using the bible to select between two or more possible choices. One of these was the former hairdresser who consulted her pastor “because being a hairdresser is a sin in Christianity so I decided to be a weaver so as not to perish.” One of Renne’s (1993:17) informants used a similar procedure.

13. This is not, I think, the same organization as that maintained at Òjé market in Ìbàdàn by the male master weavers, although this organization too now has women members from the older weaving districts of the city. See Okuwa 1989:45.

14. It would have been useful to have attended a series of meetings of several different weaving societies to have established the extent to which the subjects discussed and the male involvement in leadership roles was typical. Unfortunately the weavers were rather cautious about admitting strangers to their meetings and given the size of the city and my commitments elsewhere I was unable to achieve the degree of familiarity and acceptance that was possible over time in the much smaller confines of Òyó. My assistant and I were only permitted to attend this single meeting after two weavers we were friendly with persuaded the officials to agree by holding out misleading prospects of future orders. Since I was uncomfortable with this approach I did not want to repeat it elsewhere. However interview data from other women weavers suggests that, perhaps by virtue of claims to seniority in the craft, male control of predominantly female weaving societies was not unusual.

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15. This picture of division of labour by gender has recently been challenged. It has been suggested that the level of full-time professional specialization necessary to achieve the high level of textile production noted in the C19th was incompatible with women's family responsibilities (Keyes-Adenaike 1993:210) and that contemporary accounts indicate that many occupations were open to both sexes. However it is clear that Yorùbá women, like women elsewhere, have been and still are able to combine their family responsibilities with a high level of output. Some indication of the organizational structures that made this possible in the textile industry, involving mobilization of female children and wards, is provided by recent scholarship on the *àdìrẹ* industry in Abẹ̀òkúta (Byfield 1993), and on C19th women's weaving among the eastern Yorùbá (Kriger 1993). As for contemporary accounts, some occupations clearly were open to both sexes, but it is likely that for many others there were locally important distinctions that escaped foreign observers.

16. Cordwell (1952:237) "In the past the cloth was woven in narrow strips on a vertical loom by male weavers." Sieber (1972:155) "In West Africa, the vertical loom is used solely by women. However, in other parts of Africa - particularly in the Congo River basin - where the strip loom is not found, the men use the vertical loom to produce raffia cloth. This suggests that in earlier times the vertical loom was used by men, primarily for weaving raffia, but that later, when the strip loom was introduced from the north, the vertical loom became the women's tool." Belasco (1980:74) makes the slightly different claim that with the increased demand for cloth resulting from the export trade "although it was women's work, weaving began to engage some men." Keyes-Adenaike (1993:223) notes that the ending of wars in the late C19th lead to the development of new weaving centres where "Male broad loom weavers abandoned their old looms to learn the new. Their wives and daughters took up their old looms."

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It is not really clear to what Cordwell is referring, although there is a single-heddle loom from Akwete set up with three narrow strips in the collection of the British Museum. Sieber's argument fails to account for the long-documented practise of women's single-heddle loom weaving in areas of eastern Nigeria where the double-heddle loom is not found. Belasco makes a version of the argument discussed in note 14 above, namely that the volume of production was too great to be achieved by women.

None of the numerous references to weaving in accounts of the Yorùbá region by nineteenth century travelers, missionaries, or local historians refer to men weaving on the upright loom, while many describe the familiar picture of male double-heddle loom weavers and female single-heddle (eg. Clarke 1972: 272-3, Campbell 1861:45, Schön 1842, Johnson 1921:110). To dismiss these as "normative generalizations" (Keyes-Adenaike 1993:212) begs the question of how such a "norm" could have arisen. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary or convincing accounts of the reasons for change we must continue to assume that the gender division of labour in Yorùbá textile production observed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was broadly similar in the eighteenth also.

17. NAI CSO 9723 Oyo Province Annual Report 1922

18. See note 42, page 168 above regarding the problems of estimating the number of weavers in a town. Both Alhaji Oyesade, the chairman of the Šakí weavers society, and Mrs. Juliana Ajayi, the chairwoman of the women's section, claimed in separate interviews that they had around 5000 members, of whom 4000 were women. (Interviews 23/1/96). While it was not possible to confirm these numbers, and there is a natural tendency to exaggerate such figures, it was clear from even a short stay in the town that there were significantly more weavers than in Òyó. In Igbòho however, the number of weavers remains small. Matory, in his study of ritualized gender ambiguity in

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the Ọ̀yọ́ empire (1994:208) notes “Since at least the 1950s, the weaving of narrow-loom cloth, or strip-weaving, has been a female profession in Igboho and neighbouring towns. The only man who remains engaged in strip-weaving is, almost predictably, a Sango priest.”

19. Interview: Mrs. Juliana Ajayi, Sakí, 23/1/1996

20. See Abraham 1958:110 “*Egbé ọ́baninbàsírí* name of a society seeking methods of making profit.”

21. Interview: Alhaji Oyesade, Sakí, 23/1/96

22. One Èkìtì woman told her: “Men of today are too proud and they will be feeling shy to stay in one place like we are doing now.” Renne comments (1993:13) that “these gender-specific ideas about bodily comportment and activity” are very localized. Although in Şakí the gender component is similar to that identified by Renne in Èkìtì, local ideas lack the association of modernity with womens’ weaving that she found, presumably because of the antiquity of the double-heddle technology in Şakí, in contrast to its recent introduction in Èkìtì.

23. Unfortunately I have not had the opportunity to study the production and consumption of aṣọ òkè in the Benin Republic, so I have no data on whether or not this demand is confined to the Yorùbá community in the country. I do have anecdotal evidence of export of more fashionable styles of aṣọ òkè bought in Lagos along the coastal road to both Benin and Togo.

24. It has been stated elsewhere that women in Ìjẹ̀bu-Òde began to weave aṣọ òkè in the 1930s (Keyes-Adenaike 1993:158.) The town has long been a major producer of cloth woven on the single-heddle loom but aṣọ òkè weaving was never an important industry in Ìjẹ̀bu and it has received little attention in the literature so we have very little historical evidence to support or refute this claim. However the seven signatories of an organization of aṣọ òkè weavers in the town, the “Egbe Omo Ilorin Alaso”, formed in May 1951 were described

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as headmen (National Archive Ibadan Ije Prof 4020. Weaver's Association). Somewhat later Lisa Aronson wrote (1992:101 note 4) "At the time of my research in 1978, both the upright loom (women's) and vertical, foot-treadle loom (men's) were being used in the Ijebu area. Some of the male weavers originated from Ilorin and were weaving the typical Ilorin cloth known as aso-oke." When I visited Ìjẹ̀bu-Òdẹ̀ in May 1996 I interviewed several women who managed small groups of double-heddle loom weavers, but they were all in their twenties and had begun to weave only around 1990. None of them knew of any significantly older women narrow-strip weavers in the town or had heard of women who followed the trade long ago. I also spoke to elderly male master weavers and elderly women single-heddle loom weavers, who also knew only of women taking up *aṣọ òkè* weaving within the last decade. Note however that Akinwumi (1990:140) refers to women taking over the weaving of certain types of prestige single-heddle loom weaving from men in the 1920s.

25. Interview: Alhaji Oyesade, Sakí, 23/1/96

26. NAI, DCI 3/4 Annual Report on Textile Development Scheme 1954.

27. NAI, DCI 1/1/403 s.5, page 1. Textile Development Sectional Report 1946-51

28. The scheme has only recently begun to receive academic attention. See Clarke 1996 for the Òyọ́ centre, Renne 1993 and 1997 for aspects of the Adó centre, Olaoye 1993 for Ilorin, and Wolff and Wahab 1996 for a post-Independence centre in Ìsẹ̀yìn. I am not aware of any work on the centres in the north or east of Nigeria.

29. For the purposes of the present discussion I am taking the eastern Yoruba to include certain towns in the east of the old Òyọ́ Province such as Ifẹ̀, Èdẹ̀, Ilẹ̀ṣà, and Òsogbo, (all now in Òsun State), together with the former Oṇḍó Province, including such towns as Adó Èkìtì, Àkúrẹ̀, Òwò, and Oṇḍó.

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30. There are small but long established groups of male double-heddle loom weavers in Ọsogbo, Ede (originally an outpost of old Ọyó), and in the Ọyó Yorubá inhabited Modákéké district of Ife. Even smaller numbers of male weavers whose ancestors migrated in the second half of the nineteenth or early in the twentieth century may be found in most other towns in the area. See Kriger 1993 for an account of the organization of women's weaving in Èkìtì.

31. NAI, DCI 1/1/402 Textile Centre, Ado Ekiti

32. Interview Deacon T.B.Falodun, Ọyó, 6/2/1996. Mr. A.Southern, the officer engaged by the Department of Commerce and Industries to oversee the Textile Development Scheme, had previously worked as Textile Officer at Achimota College.

33. NAI, DCI 1/1/402 Textile Centre, Ado Ekiti p.209

34. Ibid. Volume II. There is a lengthy and at times acrimonious correspondence in the archive over the problems of this centre. Since it was not centrally funded it was supervised by officials with no textile experience and rapidly ran up a large debt. After a few years and several attempts at reorganization the centre was closed.

35. Although we shall concentrate here on weaving, the related attempt to transform the technology of cotton spinning through the introduction of spinning wheels was even less successful. By 1951 a report (DCI 1/1/403/55 page 1) acknowledged "it proved impossible to persuade spinners to change over from spindle to wheel spinning." The major reason for this failure appears to have been related to the organization of production rather than the technology. Spinning was largely the work of young women in relations of dependence as children or wards, or a part-time occupation for older women after returning from the farms or the market. At the low rates of payment offered at the centres spinning was not sufficiently remunerative to persuade adult women to spin full-time.



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36. NAI, DCI 3/4 Annual Report on Textile Development Scheme.
37. NAI, DCI 4032 s/8 Import Control: Textiles and Cotton Goods.
38. NAI Ondo Prof 1/1/ 1836A page 40. Owo Native Administration Textile Centre
39. NAI, DCI 1/1/403 Textile Development Progress Reports. vol.1 page 161.
40. For details of Deacon Falodun's career see Clarke 1996.
41. NAI, DCI 1/1/402, Textile Centre, Ado Ekiti page 102.
42. NAI, DCI 1/1/402, Textile Centre, Ado Ekiti page 150-151.
43. NAI, DCI 1/1/404, Textile Centre Oyo, Matters relating to, page 202.
44. DCI Oyo Prof 1757/1/43 Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province
45. DCI Oyo Prof 1757/1 Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province page 48.  
More recent research on weaving technology in West Africa (Browne 1983, Goody 1982) has stressed the economic significance of the labour of junior relatives in the weaving process. Although the official was specifically addressing the male double-heddle weavers of Ọyọ, the position of female weavers using the single heddle upright loom in Onḡó province was similar.
46. See Clarke 1996 for a consideration of the impact of the scheme against the background of male weaving in Ọyọ Province. In brief, very few weavers took up the new technology. A small number of male new entrants to the industry, such as Deacon Falodun, were able to maintain significant businesses through the 1970s on the basis of orders for school uniforms from local authorities. When these orders were lost in the mid-1970s they continued on a reduced scale mostly by seeking orders from the aṣọ òkè market. By the 1980s Falodun was the only such weaver left in the town.
47. See Picton 1992:47. My own experience confirmed his observations, with Ijebu-Òde now the only city where a significant amount of single-heddle weaving is still done.
48. NAI, Ondo Prof 1/1/1836B Owo Native Authority Textile Centre 1947-50

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49. NAI, DCI 1/1/403 Textile Development Progress Reports. Vol.1, 7 Sept.1948
50. A separate government initiative at this time was attempting to promote a cooperative movement in Nigeria, so weavers were encouraged to adopt a cooperative structure.
51. NAI, DCI 1/1/403 s.5 Textile Development Sectional Reports 1946-51.
52. *ibid.*
53. NAI, DCI 3/4 Annual Report on Textile Development Scheme.
54. CMS Archive, Birmingham University Library (CA2 049/95 Journal of Rev. David Hinderer 24/9/1849). I am grateful to Professor J.D.Y. Peel for drawing this reference to my attention.
55. NAI, CSO 36381 s.3 Vol. I Local Industries - Spinning and Weaving, page106
56. See Carroll 1961a.
57. Carroll n.d. (1)
58. It was noticeable that the weavers I interviewed in Ìbàdàn in 1996, mostly operated on a larger scale, with more apprentices and greater output than those Renne found in Èkìtì in 1992. Whether this reflects higher demand for cloth in Ìbàdàn or a general increase in the activity of women weavers over the four year gap is unclear.
59. Akinlami 1989:14. Mrs. Florence Olarewaju of the Olarewaju Weaving Centre.
60. Unfortunately this man was too ill to be interviewed in 1995. All information comes from his daughter Mrs. Wemimo Ogunkunle, (Interview 2/11/1995).
61. By contrast we found no women whose training could be traced back directly or indirectly to the Textile Training Centres at Òyó, or Ìlórín (apart from two women whose training had included instruction at Ìbàdàn

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Polytechnic by an Ọ̀yọ́ graduate.) Even the sole woman European loom weaver in Ọ̀yọ́ Town itself was sent by her father to learn from a woman in Ìkòlẹ̀ Èkìtì (Interview Mrs. Adeoti Ladigbolu 16/1/1996)

62. Interview: Mrs. Wemimo Ogunkunle, Ìbàdàn, 2/11/1995.

63. i.e. 39 strips of 4 inch wide cloth 90 inches long.

64. Although an outside observer might anticipate that this cloth would not be accepted as “real” *aṣọ òkè* because it was not in narrow strips, none of my respondents had encountered this view.

65. Among these was the Ori Ire Weaving Centre in Anfani district, established by an Ilẹ̀ṣà woman. This large workshop is another key source for the spread of womens’ weaving in Ìbàdàn, training up to forty apprentices at a time.

66. A full survey of the impact of the NDE on weaving in Ìbàdàn is currently being undertaken by N.Mbanefoh and Y.Aboaba of the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research. See Wolff et al. 1995:49

67. Similarly in Ọ̀yọ́ Town, the only weaver who had obtained trainees through the NDE was a school teacher. Renne (1993) noted that one of her respondents had been trained under an NDE scheme in Àkúré.

68. As we have seen above, a persistence of older norms in the eastern Yorùbá districts from which many of Ìbàdàn’s women weavers originate, but a more recent development elsewhere.

69. Respect for age and seniority is highly important in Yorùbá culture, and it may well be that young men would find it extremely difficult to attract apprentices with so many senior weavers around in these cities.

70. There are also several women from Okene selling cloth woven on the single-heddle loom.

71. For example: Interview: Mrs. John, Lagos, 9/4/ 1996 “They never come to us. Their material is not quality as much [sic] as the ones we buy.”.

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72. Interview: Alhaji Kẹgunhẹ, Ìsẹyìn, 5/3/1996

## Chapter Five - Cloth Marketing

### Designing Women: "Super Q," Traders, and the Dynamics of Aşo Òkè Marketing.

*"A kì í fí aşọ ẹẹ òdídí yọwọ "* - One does not haggle over bundled cloth - Yorùbá proverb (Owomoyela 1988:41).

In October 1995 two young Ghanaian men traveled to Aráòmí market in Òyó bringing with them samples of cloth woven by the small group of Ewe weavers they manage at a site on the edge of Lagos. Once there they set out their wares alongside the thousands of Yorùbá weavers who regularly attend what is now the largest of three wholesale markets for aşọ òkè. To their surprise however they found that many of the designs in their sample book were already on sale in local versions woven by Yorùbá weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn or Ilorin. The dynamics of the current demand for hand-woven cloth in Nigeria are such that the designs had spread faster and further than the weavers who had helped to initiate them. Moreover the cloth that the weavers were selling was neither the ubiquitous "kente" inspired designs that are the mainstay of Ewe weaving back home in the Volta region of Ghana, nor a copy of the aşọ òkè woven throughout southwestern Nigeria in the mid-1990s. Instead it was a new and complex hybrid style, mixing together certain features of the Ewe weavers technical and design repertoire, with influences from local Yorùbá aşọ òkè, blended with a third input drawing aspects from cloth woven by Tukolor weavers in Dakar, Senegal<sup>1</sup>. This hybrid style, which was widely known as "Super Q" has transformed the design repertoire of aşọ òkè weaving in the closing years of the twentieth century.

In the previous chapter we noted that although the recent movement of young women into aşọ òkè weaving posed an increasing challenge to the existing structure of the industry they had not as yet exerted any impact on the



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processes of design change. It was suggested that this was because the key impetus for design change lies in the interaction of female cloth dealers with a limited number of established male master weavers. Here we will look at this interaction and the emergence of the system of specialized cloth markets that facilitates it. In addition to inaugurating and mediating incremental design change, a few of these women traders are posing a further potential challenge to the master weavers by experimenting with new models of patronage via direct employment of weavers. Although these new entrepreneurs are at present relatively few in number it was their activities that initiated the novel international input into the technical and design repertoire of *aşo òkè* weaving. The resulting "Super Q" and related developments have established Lagos and its environs as a rival, in influence if not in quantity of output, to the long-standing weaving centres of the *Ọ̀yọ́* hinterland.

### **The market network: from Abẹ̀òkúta to Ọ̀yọ́.**

In his remembrances of childhood in the Aké quarter of Abẹ̀òkúta (1981:128), Wole Soyinka recalls the women traders from the *Ìjẹ̀bu* region who rested at his father's house in the town. "They frequently arrived late at night like a weather-beaten caravan, heavy laden baskets and fibre sacks on their heads. They were filled with smoked meats, woven cloths and local ointments, *gari*, yam flour, even tins of palm oil." At the end of the 1940s an official touring the *Òkè-ihò* district observed that there were a lot of weavers in the area and noted<sup>2</sup> that their cloth "goes to Abeokuta by headload through Iganna and Igboora." Alhaji Shittu Gbeko the elderly chairman of the *Ìsẹ̀yìn* weavers' society recalled that it was up until the war with Hitler that weavers used to go regularly to Abẹ̀òkúta<sup>3</sup>, while his *Ọ̀yọ́* counterpart, Alhaji Olatunji

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remembered<sup>4</sup> “Our fathers, those who gave birth to us, were selling their goods at Abẹ̀òkúta until when we grew into adults and went there with them also.”

Although the importance of Abẹ̀òkúta as a centre for the production and marketing of *àdìrẹ*, indigo-dyed factory-woven cloth, is well known, the significance of the town to the trade in *aşo òkè* has not previously been noted. The gradual imposition of colonial authority, and the associated construction of a new transport infrastructure of motor roads and the railway had a far reaching effect on patterns of trade in the colony from the turn of the century. In particular the British insistence on free movement and the abolition of local tolls meant that old entrepôt markets between zones of political authority were no longer needed. Ann O’Hear (1984) has documented the adverse impact of this shift away from regional middlemen and brokers on the economy of Ìlọ́rín. While Abẹ̀òkúta, with its large community of educated Saro<sup>5</sup> traders and easy access by rail to Lagos, was well placed to take advantage of this market reorganization and increase its importance as a trading centre, it seems likely that the development of a wholesale market for *aşo òkè* in the town was a secondary effect of the importance of the *àdìrẹ* trade in the first three decades of this century.

Abẹ̀òkúta was a recognized centre of indigo dyeing in the nineteenth century but, as Judith Byfield has recently demonstrated (1993:1), the *àdìrẹ* industry was “integrally associated with Abeokuta’s integration into the international economy and the rise of the colonial state.” The surge in cloth imports made possible by the growth in cash crops and the credit activities of European firms allowed some women dyers to step out of the old chain of production to become owners of the final product (ibid), albeit heavily reliant on credit finance. By 1910 *àdìrẹ* was being shipped in large quantities to the Gold Coast alongside the older export trade in *aşo òkè* (see page 248 below), with both export and domestic demand heavily dependent on increasing wealth

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derived primarily from cocoa growing. In the 1920s Ègbá merchants in Abẹ̀òkúta were acting as landlords and brokers for Ghanaian and Senegalese traders who regularly attended the Ìtòkú cloth market (ibid:148). However in the course of that decade a number of developments combined to undermine the newly established female entrepreneurs. Demand fell as a weakening of product prices cut incomes throughout West Africa, while European firms responded to the same adverse shift in the terms of trade by cutting back on credit and extending their own shop networks (ibid:156ff). New restrictions on child pawnship impeded a system of labour recruitment that *àdìrẹ* traders had used to maintain what was a labour intensive industry. Increasing use of caustic soda (first introduced in 1924) and later of artificial indigo, intended to cut production time and costs, exacerbated the industry's problems as quality standards fell and new entrants were attracted by the simpler dyeing methods. A contemporary estimate suggested that turnover had fallen from £500,000 per annum before 1928, to £150,000 by the mid 1930s (ibid:173.)

At this period Ìtòkú market in Abẹ̀òkúta was also the major wholesale market for *aşò òkè*, although the town was never itself an important weaving centre. Weavers carried their cloth by road, rail, or headload to the town, attracted by the large number of textile traders drawn from all across West Africa who came primarily to purchase *àdìrẹ*. By the 1930s when the market there was beginning to decline, many weavers also traveled to sell their cloth in Lagos. Although a certain amount of cloth was still taken by both weavers and traders to the cities of northern Nigeria, and to Onitsha, the main market to the east, both the two major sources of demand for *aşò òkè* in the prewar years were to the south - namely for export by sea, primarily to the Gold Coast, and for sale domestically, particularly in the major population centres of Ìbàdàn and Lagos. The market at Abẹ̀òkúta, and the second wholesale market that



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developed in Lagos itself, were orientated towards the needs of these two customer bases.

In Lagos there was no designated market place to which the weavers took their cloth. They did not, as Lamb (Lamb and Holmes 1980:30)<sup>6</sup> assumes, sell cloth at Jankara market on Lagos Island, which is a daily retail market with an important *aṣọ òkè* section mostly run by traders originally from Ìlọrin. Instead they went every 32 days to two areas on the island and simply set out their wares in bundles beside the street. Alhaji Gbeko of Ìsẹyìn recalls going with his father as a boy to sell cloth at Èbúté-èrò in the morning, moving to another site at Òkè Àrìn in the evening<sup>7</sup>.



Figure 34: An early C20th photograph showing a small group of Yorùbá cloth traders. Note the folded *sányán* robe in the centre, and the wooden beaters used to press cloth. Photographer unknown, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, London, circa 1910.

The shift from Abẹ̀òkúta to a more organized wholesale market at Òjé in Ìbàdàn was a gradual one. Ìtòkú market did not really recover from the

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“precipitous decline” of the *àdìrẹ* market between 1937 and 1939 (in the Gold Coast there were protests and a crop hold up in response to a fall in cocoa prices from £27 per ton in 1937 to £13 the following year) (Byfield 1993:228), but as we have seen some weavers from *Òkè-ihò* were still taking cloth there as late as 1949. Vagale (1972:32) in his survey of *Ìbàdàn* markets notes that although *Òjé* market was founded circa 1860, the cloth trade developed from 1938 “when traders from other parts of Nigeria were allowed to sell their native cloths”, while Hodder (1980:208) agrees that the building of a major tarred road just to the north of the market in 1940 was an important factor in improving transport links by lorry with the weaving centres. It may also be significant that the *Òjé* area had been settled by many people from *Ogbómòṣó* (Bello 1982:1), a town noted for its cloth traders.



Figure 35: *Òjé* market in the 1960s. Women traders sell *àdìrẹ* cloth, while *aṣọ òkè* wrappers are piled on the stalls behind. Photographer unknown, Courtesy of Ministry of Information, *Ìbàdàn*.

The cloth market at *Òjé* takes place every sixteen days<sup>8</sup>, on a cycle that was unconnected to that of the 32 day Lagos market. For many years these two markets operated in tandem as the main wholesale distribution points for *aṣọ òkè*, with master weavers in the major weaving towns forming trading societies grouped around attendance at either. In *Ìsẹyìn* at least traders were not supposed to sell their cloth at both markets since they were prohibited from

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belonging to both trading societies (Bray 1966:118). Although it is difficult now to quantify their relative importance, Bray's data from the 1960s indicating that Òjé was by far the more significant of the two markets for Iséyìn weavers, accords with the impression gained from interviews with weavers in Òyó today.

In the 1960s and 70s two further, much smaller, cloth markets were established at Èdẹ, a town to the east of Ìbàdàn, and at Aráòmí on the outskirts of Òyó. These served as bulking markets where traders could purchase cloth from weavers who lacked sufficient business to make the journey to Ìbàdàn worthwhile, and in the case of Èdẹ, as a regional distribution centre for cloth traders based in the east of the Yorùbá-speaking region. Some of this cloth was then resold at Òjé, while the remainder was taken for retail distribution via local markets.

In the course of the 1970s fewer and fewer weavers bothered to make the journey to Lagos. It is hard to point to a specific reason for the decline of this market but weavers interviewed referred to the ever-increasing congestion of the streets where they traded as a major problem<sup>9</sup>. Anyone who has walked around Lagos Island will sympathize with this complaint but it is more likely that the trade was simply overshadowed by the success of Òjé. Access for traders from Lagos to Ìbàdàn became increasingly easy with the opening of new road links, including the more direct expressway to Lagos, and some six to eight thousand buyers attended each market day (Vagale 1972:32). In any event by the end of the 1970s master weavers were no longer taking cloth to Lagos in significant numbers. In the meantime the cloth market at Èdẹ grew from being primarily a bulking market for Òjé to a significant wholesale market in its own right. Operating on an independent sixteen day cycle from Òjé, it began to attract growing numbers of master weavers from all the main weaving centres during the 1980s. By the mid-1990s large numbers of weavers

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from Ìsẹ̀yìn and Òyó were traveling to the town in a convoy of minibuses each market day.

Unlike the gradual ebb of weavers and traders from one site to another that marked the previous movement of cloth markets, the final change in the network to date was an organized shift in the early 1990s from Òjé in Ìbàdàn to Aráḍomí in Òyó. This move was motivated by a long running dispute between the market authorities at Òjé and the representatives of visiting weavers. The cause of dispute was the failure of the market authorities to maintain security on what is an increasingly congested site. There has never been a specific market building or reserved trading area at Òjé which is centred around a fork in the road. When the market grew in the 1940s this area was mostly an open space where weavers could spread out their cloths on the ground. It was still largely undeveloped in the mid-1960s<sup>10</sup> but over the years the space available to weavers was reduced by an ever increasing number of houses and small shops. By the end of the 1980s, apart from a small triangle of open land at the road junction visiting master weavers were obliged to set out their wares in the alleys between houses, on verandahs, and on the edges of the streets. Small amounts of rent were paid each market day to the house owners (amounting to a N1 charge, known as *owólé*, per set of cloth sold (Ogunsanwo 1986:12). The market is administered jointly by the officials of the Ìbàdàn weavers' society, known as the Ifelodun Native Cloth Traders Association, and the owners of the land represented by local compound heads led by the senior member of Delesolu compound. In Yorùbá society one of the primary responsibilities of any market authority is to provide security, to ensure that participants at the market are able to carry on their trade in safety. It is apparent that in the early years of the 1990s many of the visiting master weavers lost confidence in the ability of the market authorities at Òjé to fulfill this requirement. With orders and sales of large numbers of "complete" sets of

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aşo òkè taking place both master weavers and visiting traders are often in possession of quite substantial amounts of cash. No doubt reflecting to a considerable extent the more general increase in armed robbery throughout Nigeria in the current economic crisis numerous robberies took place at Òjé, with the escape of the perpetrators made easier by the maze of narrow alleyways that now cover the area. According to the senior weavers in Òyó and Ìsẹ̀yìn<sup>11</sup>, increasingly acrimonious disputes arose because the market leaders repeatedly levied additional money from the master weavers for extra security measures such as hiring additional watchmen, but failed to improve the situation.

The market established in the 1970s at Aráṣòmí, a site on the outskirts of Òyó some 100 metres off the main Òyó to Ìbàdàn road (see map page 136) appears not to have been very successful. An attempt made in the late 1980s to lure more weavers there from Òjé failed, with those weavers who moved quickly returning to Ìbàdàn. In 1992 however, the leaders of the weaving societies in Ìsẹ̀yìn, Ìlọ́rín, and Òyó set out not to create a rival market but, as they phrased it, to “move” Òjé market to Òyó. To this end, they obtained, with the help of the Aláàfin of Òyó and of the local government, the use of a large open area at Aráṣòmí for the construction of a purpose-built market. In the months leading up to the planned move they distributed leaflets to cloth traders visiting Òjé informing them of the date of the impending “move.” Since it was ostensibly to be the same market, it was scheduled to take place on the same 16 day cycle, directly challenging the older market for customers. The first market was held at Aráṣòmí on 16 November 1992.



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### **Aráòmí Market and Cloth Trade in the 1990s:**

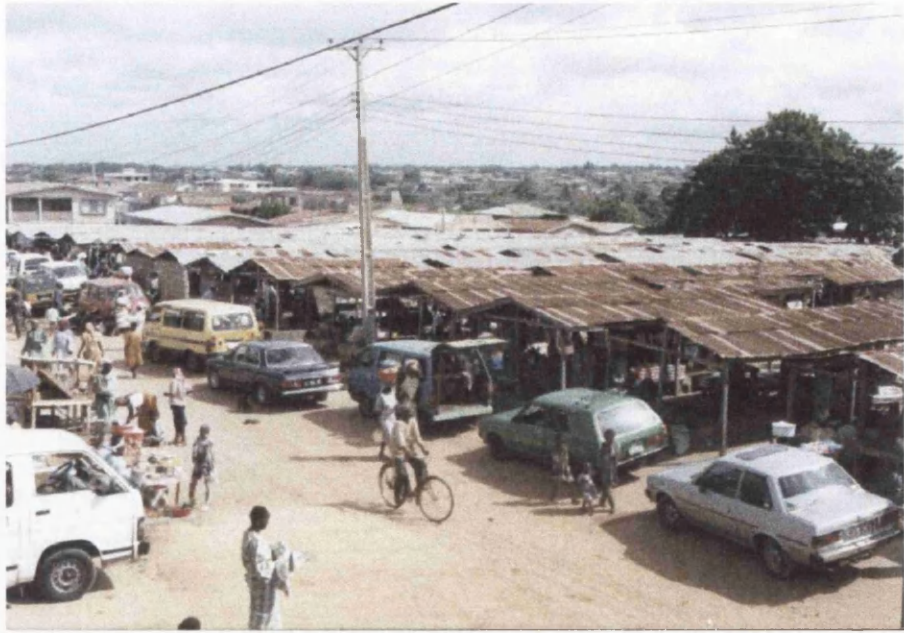


Figure 36: The rows of stalls at Aráòmí market, Òyó, February 1996. Cars and buses gather along the track in the foreground to carry the visiting traders and their bundles of cloth back to their home towns.

Once it became apparent that both master weavers and cloth traders were prepared to move to Òyó in large numbers rows of market stalls were constructed on the Aráòmí site, leaving only an open space shaded by a few trees at the centre. Each stall has a corrugated iron roof and room for two rows of two or three wooden tables. Depending on the amount of cloth they normally bring to the market each master weaver occupies a space varying from half a table to three tables<sup>12</sup>. Many have painted their name and that of their compound on the roof frame above their regular spot. The weavers are grouped in rows by their town of origin, with the first seven rows as the market is approached from the main road occupied by Ìlórín men. Each row in this section has eight or nine stalls. Beyond this are three rows mostly filled by Iséyìn weavers, together with a few from Òkè-ihò. The next row is also for Òkè-ihò weavers, with three stalls at the back used by men from Ìgànná. The

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following row has weavers from Ìwéré, more from Òkè-ihò, and one stall from Ayétóro. After this is a large open area bounded by stalls at each end. The Òyó weavers, who as hosts of the market had first choice of location, sit along the end of this section filling a total of nine stalls. Beyond them are two stalls of weavers from Òsogbo and eight from Èdẹ. The final section of the market, extending the full length of the far side and enclosing the open section at the back is taken up by women selling thread and lurex. There are also four women who sell single-heddle loom cloths including babyties that they have brought from Okene in Kogi State. The Ghanaian weavers mentioned at the beginning of the chapter were allowed to set out their cloth in a vacant stall next to the Òyó men.

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The market is administered by a committee drawn from officials of the constituent weavers' societies, formed into an overall society that claims to represent all the aṣọ òkè weavers of Nigeria. When it was first established the regular meeting was held at the chairman's house in Òyó three days after each Èdẹ market. Since 1994 however persistent, if intermittent, petrol shortages have made traveling increasingly expensive, so the schedule has been altered so that a meeting is held at Aráṣomí market at around 1 p.m. on the market day when trading has subsided. The leadership of the Yorùbá-wide weavers' society is drawn from the men selected as leaders of the major local societies represented. The chairman of the Òyó society, Alhaji Ọlatunji, as host to the main market, is also the chairman of the larger society. The other two officers are drawn from Ìlọrin and Ìséyìn, the two towns with the largest numbers of weavers: the secretary is the secretary from the Ìséyìn society, the treasurer fills the same role in Ìlọrin. Including these officials, two delegates attend from each of the following areas: Òyó, Ìséyìn, Ìlọrin, Kájọlà, Òsogbo and Èdẹ<sup>13</sup>. The society has a number of social responsibilities, such as sending delegations to the funerals of local officials or other prominent weavers, but its

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main function is to ensure the smooth operation of the market by liaising with the various authorities in Òyó Town, including the Aláàfin, the local government, and the police, to ensure that a clean and secure environment is maintained. Other issues, such as the unpredictable price of raw materials and the high cost of transport to the market are aired in the course of meetings, but since they are largely beyond the control of the weavers nothing is done about them. However the success of the market itself must be seen as the primary evidence that the society is capable of effective action in the interests of weavers over problems within their area of responsibility<sup>14</sup>.

The market is a major forum bringing together five groups of participants in the aṣọ òkè industry, namely weavers, master weavers, suppliers of thread and weaving requirements, cloth traders, and private customers. As well as these major players numerous others add to the clamor and throng of visitors crowding the market place. Along the track from the main road and in the open area at the centre of the market women spread out their wares: piles of tomatoes, okra, oranges, yams, dried fish, clay or aluminium pots, second-hand clothes. Men, women, and children carry trays along the aisles hawking everything from raw meat to children's underwear, embroidered caps to *fújì* tapes<sup>15</sup>. Beggars also patrol the aisles or sit waiting beside the paths. Food and drink are readily available from numerous vendors - bottles of cold Coke and Fanta carried in buckets on children's heads; freshly cooked snacks from *chinchin* to *puffpuff*<sup>16</sup>. Armed policemen, tipped by the market committee, make occasional appearances. The ubiquitous goats scavenge for dropped scraps. And of course everyone knows that markets are the meeting place of spirits.

In contrast to all this hectic activity, the majority of master weavers appear to do relatively little. Most bring with them one or more of their apprentices or dependent weavers, who will set out on display whatever cloth



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they have brought as soon as they reach the market, usually between about 7 and 8 am. Visiting master weavers and their assistants arrive in convoys of chartered minibuses bulging with sacks of cloth. They sit behind the long tables, talking to their friends and waiting for customers. It is not uncommon to see some of them stretched out on a bench or a pile of cloth sleeping. At some point they will stroll around for a few minutes, greeting the chairman and other senior men. The apprentices and other trainees are sent on errands, to buy thread, or sometimes to hawk excess thread or lurex around the other weavers. For them though, apart from the novelty of a day away from the routine of weaving, being at the market provides an opportunity to watch and listen as the master weavers interact with customers, thereby learning an important part of their future responsibilities.



Figure 37: Weavers from Iséyìn display some of their stock, bundled in packets of strips, at Aráḡmí market, 1995.

Cloth for sale is packed in bundles of strips, sufficient to make either a woman's headtie and shawl or the four piece "complete", i.e. 17 or 39 ninety inch long strips of four inch wide cloth. This standard practice today marks a change from past procedure when weavers would sew up most of their cloth into women's wrappers or men's robes (Bray 1966:79). The shift towards selling unsewn strips followed a change of fashion in the early 1980s when

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women began to use *aşo òkè* for blouses (*bùbá*) - although five strips of cloth are set aside for the *bùbá*, the size and style of the finished garment is of course not standardized. At *Aráḡmí* however there are three types of cloth that are still mostly sold already sewn up. Firstly a number of the weavers from *Ọsogbo* specialize in preparing robes and trousers for sale to traders supplying northern Nigerian markets. These machine-embroidered outfits are mostly made from cloth woven in designs and colours popular in the late 1970s - extensive use of weft-float patterns and colours such as turquoise, pink, white, beige, brown, and silver lurex. Some weavers from *Ìlọrin* concentrate on the production of a type of loosely woven white cotton cloth with lurex weft or warp stripes which also seems to be intended mostly for non-Yorùbá patrons. Finally a smaller number of *Ìlọrin* weavers produce very bright cloth using a lurex warp, which are sold as sewn cloths heavily decorated with embroidery and often plastic sequins. The latter is a holdover from a late 1980s fashion.

The amount of cloth displayed on the weavers' stalls varies considerably. A few men sit with no cloth in front of them at all, most have around five to ten completes, while in the *Ìlọrin* and *Ìsẹ̀yìn* sections there are some stalls with a hundred or more sets of cloth piled up. Although it might seem surprising that men who have no cloth for sale would bother to sit all morning at the market, this is an important clue to the priorities of the master weavers when attending the market. Those who have stocks of cloth do hope to sell it, but the main reason for being there is not to sell cloth that has already been woven but to meet with traders<sup>17</sup> in the hope of obtaining firm orders to weave cloth for them in future. Each successful master weaver has a small number of cloth traders with whom he has long established links. The markets provide a key forum for meeting these traders, arranging orders and delivering cloth previously ordered. The master weavers try to encourage the traders they know, virtually all of whom are women, to sit down at the stalls

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and may converse with them for up to half an hour even if they appear to have no intention of placing an order with them on that particular day. Partly this is because there is a general value in building up an extended relationship with a customer, and more immediately they know that few traders will have put themselves to the trouble of traveling to the market unless they have some kind of business to transact. When a woman does have orders to fill, which may be for anything from two or three to, exceptionally, several hundred “completes” she will often have small sample pieces of cloth to give the weaver. Frequently these samples, which will be carefully concealed in her handbag and only produced discreetly and one at a time, will be the basis of modifications she has produced herself or in discussion with her customer, to alter a colour or change some design configuration. Failing that she may explain what she wants to the master weaver with the help of a sketch on a scrap of paper. Most traders keep a record in a notebook of the orders they have for each design and go from one master weaver to another, marking them off as they place perhaps five or six separate orders with different weavers. For each of these orders they will be required to pay an immediate deposit of between 50% and 75% of the final cost of the cloth. Depending on when the trader needs the cloth an agreement will be reached that she will collect it at a specified market in the future, or that it will be delivered to her house or shop by a set date. For example, at the market on 11 December 1995 a trader from Ìbàdàn known as Iyá Ibéjì (“mother of twins”), who sat together with another trader from the Maryland district of Lagos talking to Alhaji Moshood of Ilé Èkẹjọ for over an hour, finally ordered eight “completes” of a cloth of yellow and purple cotton, with gold lurex warp stripes (See Appendix A - pattern P175.) She had no sample since it was a new design, but sketched the width of the various stripes she wanted using a biro, writing in the colours. She then gave the Alhaji a piece of purple thread of the shade needed. Once she had left he gave the

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thread sample to his son Kazeem, who took it around the various thread sellers trying to match up the colour. After some time he bought back three more samples from different thread sellers so the Alhaji could decide which was the closest match. The deposit received was then used to purchase the necessary amounts of thread and lurex for weaving which, since the order was to be collected at the next market, began the following day.

The majority of master weavers attending Aráðmí market, like Alhaji Moshood, are dependent on the cash advances they receive on orders such as this to supply the working capital necessary to purchase thread for weaving. Only rarely do they have sufficient extra money to weave a set of cloth to add to their small stock and display at the market. Contrary to what one might expect weavers who have only small numbers of "completes" as stock usually produce several sets of only one or two well-established designs, instead of attempting to illustrate a wide range of different patterns. Rather than hoping to catch the eye with a novel pattern among the thousands of different designs on display, they hope to benefit from the occasional trader or private customer who has an urgent requirement for a number of matching cloth sets.

In marked contrast there are a small number of master weavers (perhaps 50 or so of the more than a thousand at the market), who bring very substantial stocks of cloth, piling it high in long rows along their tables. Most of these men come from Ilorin, with a few from Iséyìn. Like their poorer colleagues their main source of trade is by direct orders from the traders. However they receive a disproportionate amount of the larger orders from the most important traders, the majority of whom are based in Lagos. Only a few of these women bother to travel to the market, although they may sometimes send an assistant. Instead they telephone their orders, or summon the master weaver or his senior assistant to come and meet them<sup>18</sup>. The primary reason why traders may prefer to deal with some of these master weavers is that they

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have an established track record for the timely delivery of good quality cloth in large quantities. The traders themselves have become successful partly through establishing reputations for reliability that it is vital to maintain - failure to supply cloth ordered for an important Lagos social event on time would be a widely publicized disaster from which their business might take years to recover. The access prominent master weavers have to large networks of weavers, together with the air of stability provided by their wealth and reputation, provides a degree of assurance in an uncertain world.

One of the main functions of the huge stocks of cloth brought to the market by this group of weavers is precisely to act as a very public display of this wealth and status. As Alhaji Kegunhe, one of the most successful weavers in Ìsẹ̀yìn explained, if he kept his money in the bank no one would be able to see it, but at the market, and in his storeroom at home, everyone can see that he is a big man and a serious weaver<sup>19</sup>. While display of wealth is a well established and essential part of attaining and maintaining “big man” status in Yorùbá society (Bascom 1951, Barber 1991,) in the case of master weavers it also functions as an advertisement of their business prowess, which will in itself earn them additional customers. Quantifying the precise amounts of cloth owned by these men would be difficult<sup>20</sup> but most bring several hundred “completes” to the market, while I have been in storerooms in Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ìlọ́rín containing literally thousands of cloth sets (see Figure 28, page 147.) What is important here is that it is a different order of business from that of the other master weavers.

Of course these men do also want to sell some of this cloth at the market, and here the size of their stock gives them several advantages. The wide range of different designs that they can display makes it more likely that something will catch the eye of a casual buyer, but also increases their chance of being able to satisfy those who come to the market looking to buy cloth of a

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particular design or colour. These buyers include both private customers planning a ceremony and traders with an urgent requirement, perhaps because an existing order has been unexpectedly increased or another weaver has let them down. Since they regularly fill orders for the major Lagos traders these master weavers are the first to pick up on new fashions and work closely with "their" traders in developing novel patterns and designs. It is possible to track the spread of a new fashion, such as the use of closely packed rows of openwork on 5 1/2 inch wide "silk" strips, by observing its increasing occurrence over successive markets. I first saw this cloth in several different colours when visiting Chief (Mrs) Owolana, one of the wealthiest Lagos traders, at the start of March 1996. At the following Aráðmí market day on March 14th it was being sold only by three major Ìlòrin master weavers, one of whom deals regularly with the Lagos trader. On April 1st it could be seen on six stalls, while at Òjé market in Ìbàdàn on the 17th, it was being displayed only by two Ìlòrin men. By June however it was available at Aráðmí on the stalls of at least ten Ìlòrin master weavers and four or five from Ìsẹ̀yìn. When I returned to Nigeria in May 1997 it was widespread throughout the market, but by then the cutting edge of design change had moved on. Both private customers and other traders look to the market stalls of these major master weavers for the all-important "latest" designs, increasing the prospect of sales out of their stock. Finally, because of the custom of *aşo ẹ̀bí*, where related participants in a ceremony wear the same cloth (see page 319 below), most customers at the market are looking for several sets of the same design, so possession of a large stock with twenty or more "completes" of several designs is a clear advantage.

There is a widely held belief, frequently expressed to me both by cloth traders and other women, that the cloth sold by weavers at the markets was of an inferior quality to that which the same weaver would supply if cloth was

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ordered from him. It was suggested that lower quality thread was used, that colours would not be fast, strips might be too narrow or too short, and that the quality of the weaving would be lower<sup>21</sup>. Lamb, in the clearest expression of this view in the literature, sees this as a deliberate policy on the part of master weavers to send the poor quality work of younger boys to the market (Lamb & Holmes 1980:30), while Bray (1966:114) distinguishes between the local night market (now defunct) in Ìsẹ̀yìn, to which the work of young boys was sent, and cloth woven by adults for sale in the markets of Ìbàdàn and Lagos. While it is no longer possible to gather data to demonstrate that cloth sold through the markets in the past was of poorer quality than that available through private orders, the continued wide currency of the belief suggests that it may well have been so. Today however the position is more mixed for several reasons. Firstly it is no longer possible to make a relevant distinction between cloth woven by adults and cloth woven by trainees, since as we have seen, the overwhelming majority of active male weavers are trainees or newly qualified young men, weaving almost all the cloth sold. Secondly, if we take the warp density of the cloth, as Bray does, to be a measure of its quality, aṣọ òkè woven in the mid-1990s could be regarded as all being of lower quality than much of that woven in the 1960s, since Bray (1966:171) found that the number of warp threads spread for a four inch strip varied in a range from about 100 to 190 pairs of threads, while today there is very little variation from a norm of 110. However we should note that a more positive light may be shed on this fall in warp density in that it relates to a shift in preferences towards more lightweight cloth. Thirdly, although it is difficult to quantify, it would appear that cloth sales at the market were a rather more significant factor in the master weavers' total business in the past than they are today, making a deliberate distinction between as it were "bespoke" and "off the peg" cloth more worthwhile. We have seen that the poorer master weavers try to build up



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a stock of cloth to bring to the market by investing their occasional small surpluses of working capital, while their better capitalized colleagues often weave several extra “completes” of each order, as well as adding sets of “completes” of the latest designs. Deliberately setting out to weave second quality cloth, which any competent buyer would recognize as such, would offset any short term savings with more long-term losses from disappointed or discouraged customers. Nevertheless, within a relatively narrower quality range set by the greater standardization of thread counts, reliance on a limited range of locally manufactured threads and imported lurex, and a mostly youthful labour force, some quality differential may still arise occasionally from master weavers or their customers exercising a stricter standard for the quality of weaving they will accept in private orders. It is certainly the case that when a customer rejects some cloth as poorly woven, as happened on one occasion when I was present at Ilé Èkẹjọ, the cloth will be offered for sale in the market. It is usually slightly cheaper to buy cloth in the market than to order, although relative prices will vary depending on factors such as bargaining ability, the weaver’s perception of the importance of the customer, and the urgency of his present needs for money.

Although Bray took the warp thread count to be the index of cloth quality, today it is not one of the factors explicitly referred to in discussing and assessing the quality of *aşo òkè*. For an experienced cloth buyer, whether a trader or a private customer, once a cloth has been identified as a potential purchase in terms of its colour, materials, and design (see page 347 below), the process of ascertaining whether this particular example of the desired cloth is of suitable quality involves a detailed examination utilizing the senses of touch, and sometimes smell or taste, as well as vision. A Yorùbá proverb warns “*A kì í fí aşọ ẹ̀dídí yọwọ*”, one does not haggle over bundled cloth (Owomoyela 1988:41). The most important thing is that the cloth should be

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tightly and evenly woven - this is assessed by rubbing the cloth between finger and thumb as well as holding it up to the light. The Yorùbá term for this desired tightness is “*gbẹ*”, which is usually translated as “dry.” At Aráòmí one frequently hears dealers complaining of a poorly woven cloth “*Kò gbẹ*”, “It’s not tight.” Then it must be neat, with even selvages on the strips, and with as few threading errors and broken threads as possible - the term for these minor errors<sup>23</sup> is “*ipeji*”, literally “second break”, then for the next ones, “*ipeta*”, “*iperin*”, “third break”, “fourth break.” She will then examine the width and length of the strips to ensure these are adequate, often using a tape measure. The relevant criticisms here are “*kò níbò*”, “It’s not wide [enough]”, or “*kò lówó*”, “It’s not long [enough.]” If she is being really thorough she may try to assess the fastness of the colour by moistening a small section of cloth with her tongue, then rubbing it against a white handkerchief. Taste and smell come in, very rarely these days, in assessing the quality of an indigo-dyed cloth - cloth that has been well dyed using natural indigo has a distinctive smell and a characteristic, slightly salty, taste on the tongue.

Not all master weavers attend the cloth markets, whether in Òyó, or at Èdẹ or Òjé. The most obvious group of absentees are the women weaving proprietors discussed in the previous chapter, many of whom will come to the nearest market to buy cotton, silk, or lurex thread, but not to sell cloth. At Aráòmí there is only a single woman proprietor, selling cloth alongside other master weavers from her family compound in the Ìsẹyìn section, although quite a few younger women assist their fathers. The only other women selling hand-woven cloth there are: the four women selling single-heddle loom cloths from Okene already mentioned; three or four elderly women from the Ìjẹbu area selling second-hand<sup>24</sup> *aşo òkè*; and a couple of Ìlọrin women who sell single strips of cloth<sup>25</sup>. At Èdẹ the situation is similar. Around the edges of Òjé market in Ìbàdàn there are many stalls where women offer for sale often quite

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large stocks of *aşo òkè*. However these women are not weavers, they buy cloth from master weavers at the market or at weavers' compounds in the city, and in some cases take cloth to sell on commission for the weavers. This is a business local women have built up alongside the market over a period of many years, with small cloth shops most of which are open everyday, although it is on market days that trade is busiest. Female weaving proprietors are not directly excluded from selling cloth in any of the three big markets but in general they lack sufficient capital to weave cloth for sale and do not usually receive regular orders from cloth traders (see page 214 above). Many of the less affluent male master weavers are in a similar position. Some of these still attend one of the markets to buy thread and socialize with their colleagues, but many others do not bother to come. Instead, like the women, they rely on private orders obtained through their network of relatives and acquaintances<sup>26</sup>. On the other hand, some of the wealthiest master weavers also do not sell cloth at the markets. This is true of the two men regarded as the most successful master weavers in *Òyó* (see page 139 above.) These men may occasionally be seen walking through the market at *Aráòmí* with a group of followers, but they rely for business on an established network of traders contacted by telephone or private visits, rather than on meetings in the market place<sup>27</sup>.

We have seen that master weavers normally attend the cloth markets primarily in the hope of receiving orders from wholesale traders, as well as to maintain their network of social ties with other weavers and traders, to try to sell cloth from their stocks, and to purchase raw materials needed to continue weaving. Although the sites of major markets have changed over the years what little evidence is available supports the conclusion that from the perspective of the weavers, the priority presently assigned to pre-placed orders has gradually increased. Writing in 1947 R.Wilkes, a District Officer with considerable experience in the *Yorùbá* region noted<sup>28</sup>: "Although a certain

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quantity of cloth is woven on chance for sale in the local market to local people or itinerant traders, at least 70% of past and present production is to fill definite orders. Master weavers go to Lagos, Ijebu-Ode and Abeokuta with samples and take orders from big traders.” Several weavers, however, while noting that orders had been important in the past also, made it clear that they had previously woven larger quantities of cloth for market sale. For instance Alhaji Rasak of Ilé Èkẹjọ commented<sup>29</sup> that at the time when he trained, weavers used to watch which new designs were selling well at the market, then go home and copy them, but that these days since they have so many orders they no longer do this much. This increasing reliance on specific orders is part of a package of changes that has occurred further down the distribution channels of the *aşo òkè* industry over the last half century, as the focus has switched from the export trade to a concentration on the domestic market. It is to the changing personnel and patterns of trade that have accompanied this shift that we turn in the following section.

### **From Export Trade to Domestic Consumption:**

The weavers of the Yorùbá-speaking region of Nigeria have a long history of involvement in production for export markets. From the seventeenth century Dutch and English traders purchased large quantities of single-heddle loom cloths from Ìjẹbu and Benin for shipment to the Gold Coast and Angola (Ryder 1969:93), possibly, at least in the case of the Gold Coast, tapping into preexisting local trade routes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century weavers utilizing both loom technologies were participants in the southern peripheries of complex textile trading networks within the Sokoto Caliphate (Perani 1988, Kriger 1993) which we have suggested had a far reaching impact on the formation of Yorùbá ideas about prestige textiles. The export trade to

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the Gold Coast in the late nineteenth and twentieth century is merely the most recent of a series of important trading links to involve weavers in the region.

Yorùbá traders from Ìlórín were resident in the major entrepôt town of Salaga in northern Ghana by the late nineteenth century (Johnson n.d.) The large-scale cloth trade was established as early as the 1870s<sup>30</sup>, but it became particularly profitable in the years immediately following the first World War when little imported European cloth was available (Eades 1994:27). Jeremy Eades, who provides the fullest documentation of the cloth export trade to the Gold Coast in his wider account of Yorùbá migration to the region noted: “the earliest descriptions of trade in Northern Ghana that I received from informants spoke of a variety of goods being taken there from Nigeria, including beads and bracelets from Bida, antimony (tiro), natron (kaun) and various types of Yoruba cloth from different Yoruba towns. It was in the period after 1918, however, that Yoruba cloth became the most important item being sold by Yoruba traders in the North, and this remained the case throughout the interwar period” (ibid:35). This trade involved broadloom cloths woven by women, and indigo-dyed *àdìrẹ* cloths (which Eades (op.cit.) notes were the cheapest available coloured cloths in Northern Gold Coast), but *aşo òkè* was certainly a major component of the business. *Aşo òkè* as a more expensive cloth was particularly popular with the cash rich, such as demobbed soldiers.

Among the areas from which concentrations of migrant Yorùbá traders were particularly marked were many of the towns of the northern Òyó, notably Ogbómòşó, Òyó itself, Ìgbòhò, Şakí, and Òkè-ihò. All of these towns were outside the newly prosperous cocoa growing belt, with, as we have noted in the case of Şakí (page 186), little economic development but long-standing associations with *aşo òkè* weaving. Migrants from Ogbómòşó were notable amongst the largest traders and were apparently the first to ship large quantities of cloth by the coastal route using rail transport to Lagos, ship to Accra, and

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then rail up to Kumasi and Tamale (ibid:39). Smaller traders brought headloads of cloth, or used bicycles, across country following the old kola trade routes from Ilorin or Òkè-ihò via Kisi, Niki, Djougou and Yendi. In some cases traders would send their cloth by sea but walk themselves.

Although many of the Yorùbá who settled in Gold Coast in the inter-war period moved into other product lines, the trade in aṣọ òkè continued to be important, especially in the north of Gold Coast. In the 1940s a ban on the export of cloth from Nigeria was imposed, ostensibly to conserve space on ships as a wartime measure. While there is considerable correspondence in official files disputing the effects of the measure on the local weaving industry, there is no doubt that it had a marked short-term impact in some areas, notably Ogbómòṣò<sup>34</sup>. After the war ended there was some controversy as attempts were made to get the ban lifted. Some officials argued that it be retained on the grounds that there was a local shortage of cloth within Nigeria. However the Aláàfin of Òyó wrote to the District Officer in March 1946 complaining<sup>32</sup> that "Trade in Native Clothes is closed down entirely and even nobody from Oyo or Iseyin can move the Native clothes from Lagos to Gold Coast, Seria-Lion [i.e. Sierra Leone] or other places over seas." The previous month (6 February 1946) an editorial in the Lagos paper *The Daily Service* had noted the injustice of a ban which was not extended to àdìrẹ where the commercial firms were affected and urged an immediate lifting. The ban was finally revoked on 12 May 1947<sup>33</sup> and with renewed prosperity in the cocoa belts of both Nigeria and Gold Coast the long-term effects seem to have been rather limited. The impact of the ban was clearly reduced by the continuation throughout the war years of the cross-country trade routes, and the subsequent gradual decline in the business seems to have been more due to local factors in the importing regions than the interruption of trade. Eades found that by the 1950s the trade in aṣọ òkè in the northern part of the Gold Coast had become capital intensive and

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dominated by a small number of wealthy traders (1994:64). While there are no statistics on trade volumes, his account (ibid:95) of a single trader regularly purchasing cloth to the value of £300-£600 gives some indication of the quantities involved. The trader would bring samples of the patterns required to the weavers, wait for three or four weeks while they were woven, then accompany them back to the Gold Coast. In 1952 it was reckoned that this was still the largest single market for Yorùbá cloth, although it was noted that the domestic demand was becoming increasingly important (Dodwell 1955:131). By the end of the decade however increased import duties, exchange controls, and the development of local weaving around Tamale had made the trade unprofitable (ibid:85). The expulsion of the Yorùbá migrants from independent Ghana in the aftermath of the Alien's Compliance Order of 1969, had little impact on the *aşò òkè* industry since by that time the export trade had already dwindled to relative insignificance.

The traders who controlled the shipment of *aşò òkè* to the Gold Coast, were, with a few exceptions, men. Although there were many women among the migrants they mostly traded in provisions, lacking the access to capital necessary for the long distance cloth trade (Eades 1994:95). Most of the major cloth traders among the migrants, as we have noted, were men from the northern Yorùbá towns, with Ogbómòşó traders particularly prominent. These men were able to exploit their local knowledge and in some cases family ties to weaving compounds to obtain regular supplies of cloth locally as well as drawing on the major markets at Abéòkúta, Lagos, and subsequently at Òjé in Ibàdàn. A second group of male traders was also important in the distribution of *aşò òkè* at much the same period. These were men from Ìjèbu-òde, a town whose traders had a long history of acting as middlemen between weavers in the interior and customers on the coast. Although there were very few Ìjèbu among the migrants to the Gold Coast (Eades 1994:23), they were active in

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buying cloth from master weavers and bulking it for resale in Lagos to export traders<sup>34</sup>.

Alongside this intermediary role in the export trade, men from Ìjèbù bridged the gap between master weavers and the retail traders who controlled the distribution of aṣọ òkè to its final customers within much of Nigeria. Bray was able to document the continued importance of these Ìjèbù traders as late as the mid-1960s, but today their niche rôle has largely disappeared. The Ìjèbus had two methods of trading in Ìsẹ̀yìn (Bray 1966:113-114). Firstly men would visit weaving compounds a few days before each Òjé market and buy cloths that the weavers had prepared for sale. The traders would then take the cloths to Ìbàdàn and sell them there themselves, making a small turn out of the lower price some weavers would accept to avoid the trouble and expense of travelling to the market. More importantly, some of the traders would bring with them sample strips and place orders for specific amounts of cloth of the desired design. Although Bray does not discuss the ultimate source of these orders it is likely that the traders were often acting on behalf of retail traders in passing on orders from customers, since she noted that this type of business increased markedly in the weeks preceding Christmas when ceremonial demand was at its highest. Other Ìjèbù traders were among the men who bought cloth, through orders and market purchases, from the master weavers at Òjé market for resale into the retail distribution network, both directly in their home town and via women traders. We have suggested above that the range of patterns woven in the past was rather more limited than it is today and that there was a marked tendency for compounds of weavers to specialize in particular designs for quite long periods. Amongst the key knowledge that these traders were able to exploit was a familiarity with the range of cloths woven in the different compounds of towns such as Ìsẹ̀yìn and Òyó, enabling them to secure the cloth they needed in a timely fashion<sup>35</sup>. It is not clear whether Ìjèbù traders were as



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important in Ilorin, although it is possible that they were among the southern Nigerian cloth dealers who were noted at Gambari market in the town in 1912<sup>36</sup>. It was traders from Osogbo and Ogbómòṣó, towns on the two roads between Ilorin and the southern markets who were singled out in official comments (O'Hear 1984:145-147), with one informant claiming that the latter in particular dominated the trade.

As early as the 1930s the intermediary position of the Ijebu traders was under threat from more direct links between weaving towns and the retail trade. In response to this competition a guild was formed in 1935 that charged a £5 membership fee and proposed to restrict trade to members and impose minimum prices. A petition from the newly formed Ijebu Native Woven Cloth Traders Guild to the Resident complained that "certain traders from Ibàdàn and other interior places are in the habit or have rather lately adopted the habit of competing with us in the other small local markets within the town of Ijebu-Ode in a manner quite undermining to our profit making, that is that they exhibit their goods in such prohibitive [sic] market places such as Lowajoda, Itaesu, Iyanre, Ntebe, Odoegbe, Imere, etc instead of restricting themselves to the principal nine-day provincial markets of Oru on Ibadan road, Oyingbo in Ijebu-Ode, and Ejirin in the Colony as custom has it from time immemorial between us and these interior traders. Whereas in our local town markets enumerated above they undersell below the price in which we originally bought these goods from their interior towns." They also complained of the growing impact of street hawkers<sup>37</sup>. Noting that these men dealt largely in cloth bought from Ìsẹ̀yìn, the response of the Resident was unsympathetic. They were welcome to form an organization but they could only regulate those who joined them on a voluntary basis, and could not act to exclude competitors from local markets. If in part these complaints reflected a more general opening up of local markets to non-indigenes in the colonial period (a

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phenomenon also noted by O'Hear in Ilorin (1984:145)), they also reflected the gradual erosion of their middleman role as the new specialized cloth markets of Abéokutá, Lagos and Ìbàdàn increased the range of direct contacts between weavers and retail traders serving the domestic market. As we have seen Ìjèbu traders were still a significant factor in the trade of Ìsẹ̀yìn and Òyó master weavers in the mid-1960s, but they are no longer a noticeable feature of the market in the 1990s. Weavers today cannot point to a specific time when they stopped coming, merely noting that as they remember it the traders were mostly old men, and as they died or retired they were not replaced by a subsequent generation. It seems likely that faster transport links and other improvements in communications allowing more regular contacts between master weavers and retail traders were a significant factor in undermining their profitability. It is the retail traders after all who have the vital access to the orders and design preferences of the end consumers. Yorùbá traders are quick to respond to adverse circumstances by shifting into new product lines and those of the old Ìjèbu who had not reached the end of their careers would simply have pursued more profitable avenues of trade elsewhere.

### **The Retail Distribution of Aṣọ Òkè:**

We will discuss the changing consumption patterns that have led to the present role of aṣọ òkè as a ceremonial cloth in the following chapter. Here we will consider the personnel involved in cloth distribution and their role in initiating and mediating design change. It is useful to distinguish between those towns with an important local weaving industry, and the major population centres such as Ìbàdàn and Lagos. In the former areas, towns such as Ilorin, Ìsẹ̀yìn, and Òyó, there are relatively few retail traders and most people who wish to buy aṣọ òkè simply visit a master weaver in his compound

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and place an order directly. In many cases a woman will establish a long-lasting relationship with one or two master weavers and return to them again and again over the years as the cycle of births, engagements, weddings, funeral parties and other family celebrations provide the occasions to buy new cloth. Those retail traders that do exist generally depend for their business on customers who are unable to afford the substantial initial deposits weavers demand. Traders can advance this money on behalf of customers they believe are creditworthy, particularly well established social clubs, in the hope of taking a turn on the slightly higher price they charge for the cloth, and of recovering their outlay over a period of months. Several other methods of retail distribution that were important in the past have declined into insignificance today. Weavers used to take a proportion of their output, particularly, as we have seen, some of the poorer quality cloths woven by young trainees, for sale in the various local markets of their hometowns. The night market in Ìsẹ̀yìn was a notable example of this, with Bray (1966:114) recording an average of 14 cloth sellers there each evening at the start of 1966, but *aşo òkè* was also sold by weavers or their sons in the markets of Òyó and at the Emir's, Alanamu, and Omoda markets in Ìlọ́rín<sup>38</sup> (O'Hear 1984:47). At the start of the 1950s Bascom (Bascom and Boyer n.d.:21) noted that Òyó weavers would sometimes take cloth to the market, or let their wives take it for sale on a commission basis, but because the prices realized were so low they only did this on rare occasions when they had surplus cloth and needed cash. In the 1990s it is rare to see *aşo òkè* for sale in the markets of towns with important weaving communities<sup>39</sup>. More significant than local market sales, at least in the early 1950s, was a system of salesmen attached to each weaving compound. Bascom noted (ibid:19) that these salesmen, who were known as *oníbàrànda*, were not usually weavers and in some cases had paid a 'license fee' to the compound head. Generally they dealt in finished garments and would try to

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secure an order from a customer before commissioning a weaver, with their role in securing large orders from clubs being particularly marked. The salesman would be paid a commission of up to five percent, but could also seek to increase his return by bargaining with both the weaver and the customer. The large group of weavers based at Malába compound in Òyó, from whom Bascom gained most of his data, had twelve associated salesmen, although no information was collected as to what proportion of the compound's output they dealt with. Once again more direct contacts between weavers and customers seems to have obviated the need for these intermediaries, with their detailed knowledge of compound specialization becoming obsolete in an era of wider pattern choices. Master weavers questioned in Òyó today were largely dismissive of the role played by these men, recalling that their fathers used to give them cloth to sell only when they had no other orders<sup>40</sup>.

In the major population centres that formed the key domestic markets for aṣọ òkè women appear to have been the main traders much as they are today, although it seems likely that in these towns also the role of formal marketplaces in the sale of locally woven cloth has declined over the years. One of the earliest references to these women comes from the Lagos press at the start of the 1930s. A notice in the Lagos Daily News (3 September 1932) announced that the Association of Native-Cloth Sellers, "numbering over 100 Native women in Lagos, proposes to have prayers on Sunday for God's mercies and a relaxation of the present depression in trade." In the same decade however one of these women was able to commemorate her success by financing the construction of the small mosque known as Alhaja Aláṣòkè Mosque, which still stands near Jankara market on Lagos Island.

Jankara market is a small daily market in a purpose built but now extremely dilapidated and frequently flooded building close to Nnamdi

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Azikiwe Street. Although it is far from a typical example of the retail marketing of *aşo òkè* in the 1990s it is a useful place to begin since it provides both a rare link to the past and a contrast with the general situation elsewhere. Alongside sections of the market selling poultry, raw meat, 'traditional' medicine, pottery, and imported cloth, there are some twenty or so stalls where *aşo òkè* is sold. About half of the stalls have large stocks of second-hand cloth, particularly old indigo-dyed and cotton imitation *sányán* wrappers, which are sold to tourists and expatriate workers. The remainder stock a wide range of new cloth in currently popular designs. As with most Nigerian markets there is a traders' society with sections representing each of the main products sold. The senior woman selling *aşo òkè*, one Alhaja Balogun<sup>41</sup>, who specializes in second-hand cloth, started to work at the market in the 1930s, assisting her father and mother. Her parents, both of whom traded *aşo òkè* at Jankara all their lives, were originally from Ilorin. They drew on contacts with master weavers in their hometown, as well as traveling regularly to the wholesale markets at Òjé and Èdè. In turn three of the Alhaja's children, including one son, are currently running other stalls selling cloth in the market. This son, Alhaji Ganiyu Balogun, was the only male *aşo òkè* trader encountered during the research period. Although the Alhaja herself was too old to travel to the cloth markets anymore, one of her daughters, Alhaja R. Balogun, traveled regularly to Aráòmí to order new cloth for her own stall and buy old wrappers for her mother. This kind of small and close knit group of traders where the skills of cloth dealing were handed on in a few families was not something that was found elsewhere in the retail end of the hand-woven cloth trade. More typical was the situation in another cluster of shops<sup>42</sup> selling *aşo òkè* a few minutes walk away from Jankara.

The whole of this area of Lagos Island is recognized as a cloth selling district with both male and female traders selling an extraordinary range of

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factory manufactured and imported cloths, including the wax-resist fabrics known locally as “*ankara*”, around the section known as Gutter, Balogun Street, and Òkè Àrìn. It was here, specifically at Òkè Àrìn, that master weavers used to offer their cloth for sale once a month, spread out in piles in the street.

Although the weavers stopped coming, as we have seen, in the 1970s and early 80s, the association with *aşo òkè* has been maintained, with a number of small shops where women traders sell *aşo òkè*, particularly in a small part of the old marketing area called Daddy Alaja Street. Two factors distinguished these traders from those at Jankara market. Firstly like most other *aşo òkè* dealers they had moved into cloth selling relatively late in life after amassing the necessary capital in another trade. Secondly they were part of a wider diversification into *aşo òkè* on the part of traders who had formerly specialized in ‘lace’ and other expensive imported fabrics. It is only since the late 1980s that these shops along Daddy Alaja street have started to sell *aşo òkè*<sup>43</sup>.

It is possible to meet *aşo òkè* traders who are in their thirties but it is far more usual for them to be women in their forties or older. Amongst the women interviewed were qualified lawyers and accountants, a former policewoman, and several ex-civil servants as well as more obviously linked professions such as dress designers. In southern Nigeria, women expect to have some kind of business enterprise of their own no matter how wealthy their husband may be. Whilst not all *aşo òkè* traders come from the wealthy elites it is certainly a popular choice amongst such groups and one that enables them to utilize their extensive social networks as a customer base. Many such women often buy and sell cloth, jewellery, and fashion accessories of all types on an informal and occasional basis among their friends anyway, particularly when they have returned from a trip to Europe or America. At this level at least ethnicity is not a major factor in the industry today - although the vast majority of traders

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are Yorùbá, Edo and Igbo women can also be found running boutiques selling *aşo òkè* in Lagos.

Not all *aşo òkè* traders are wealthy - one may occasionally see small amounts of the cloth being sold from a tray head-loaded through the streets in poorer districts of Ìbàdàn or Lagos. Nevertheless, as with other forms of cloth trade, it is necessary to have a considerable amount of capital in order to maintain a reasonable range of designs in stock. With women usually bearing a considerable share of their children's educational expenses it is often not until her children have left school that even quite successful women will be able to accumulate much capital. By this time as well she will have established a wide network of friends, clients, former colleagues, etc. who can be drawn upon to establish a customer base. Although *aşo òkè* traders today rarely grant the credit that Trager (1981) found to be crucial for traders in manufactured cloth in the early 1970s, it is equally important for them in securing the vital orders for major ceremonies, that they should build up the "multiplex social ties" with selected customers that are expressed in the Yorùbá term *oníbarà*. Shared membership of the close-knit social elite, providing at least a passing familiarity with the circumstances and family history of many potential customers clearly assists in this process.

As we shall see when we consider current fashions in the consumption of *aşo òkè* in the following chapter, certain types of imported cloth complement and on occasion compete against *aşo òkè* for ceremonial use. Fashion in imported fabrics, generically referred to as "lace" changes rapidly, but popular types include satin, satin lace, voile, guipure, and organza, usually in white or pastel colours, often with gold or silver lurex embellishments. The best of these are designed specifically for the Nigerian market by companies in Austria and Switzerland, with cheaper versions made in Singapore. Prices cover a broad range from about N3000 (approx. US\$ 35) to N60,000 (US\$

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705) for the six yards required for a woman's outfit. Along with these women may wear specially designed headties, of which the most prestigious brand, made by the Hayes company in Europe, retail for around N5000 (US\$ 58). To maintain contacts with their suppliers and the crucial early access to the newest styles the more successful traders travel regularly to Europe and the Far East.

Throughout the 1980s and earlier, most traders specialized in either imported or local cloth, with the wealthier preferring to concentrate on luxury imports. In the 1990s however the precipitate devaluation of the naira has both drastically reduced demand for the more expensive imports and pushed capital requirements beyond the reach of many traders. This has brought many new entrants into the business of trading *aşo òkè*, either instead of, or in addition to imported fabrics.

Aside from the group of shops on Lagos Island there are no specific districts in Lagos for buying *aşo òkè*. A few of the older markets such as *Òyìngbò* in Ebute Metta used to be known for selling the cloth but traders no longer go there. Today individual shops can be found in most areas, with two or three in some of the upmarket shopping centres such as Adeniran Ogunsanya and Iponri in Surulere district and Alade market in Ikeja. The majority of traders however, including many of the most successful ones, operate from their private houses. Sometimes there is a discreet sign, otherwise you have to know where to go. In part this reflects concern shared by all wealthy people in Lagos over the ever-present threat of armed robbers<sup>44</sup>, but it is also an indication of the extent to which cloth traders rely on personal contacts. While less affluent traders may have just twenty or so "completes" of *aşo òkè* plus a wider selection of sample strips to show customers in their living room, some women have a separate parlour for receiving clients, together with one or more storerooms crammed to the ceiling with *aşo òkè* and imported cloth. One of the most successful and best known traders keeps two



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rooms of imported lace and headties, plus a room of *aşo òkè*, at her house in Surulere, and also owns six shops at various sites around the city including one in Daddy Alaja Street. This lady, who has a formidable reputation and markedly abrupt manner with her customers, refuses to bargain but is known for charging the lowest prices on the latest imported fabrics.

### **Traders and the Processes of Design Change:**

Traders are key players in the processes of design change in *aşo òkè*. If we follow Herbert Cole in his discussion of Owerri Igbo Mbari houses (1982:158) in making a distinction between incremental and innovatory change (Giddens 1981), it will become apparent that traders play an important role in initiating and mediating both these aspects of design modification. In this section we will be concerned with their participation in the everyday processes of incremental change, while the concluding part of the chapter will document the contribution of a small number of traders in initiating recent major design innovations.

Aside from competitive prices and the extensive personal ties that they may establish with regular customers the key to success as a trader in this crowded market is access to a regular supply of the latest designs. When people come to an *aşo òkè* trader they may either buy cloth directly from her stock or place an order for cloth to be woven in time for a forthcoming event<sup>45</sup>. In the selection and ordering of new *aşo òkè* a continuous process of incremental design change takes place. A range of possibilities within the existing repertoire of design techniques and materials is continually being explored and reconfigured in novel combinations. Traders both contribute a direct input to this process and mediate between the contributions of master weavers and cloth consumers. In our discussion of the markets we have seen

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that traders usually deal with a limited group of master weavers with whom they meet on a regular basis. In some cases these meetings take place at the cloth markets, in others the weaver will come to Lagos to deliver cloth, more rarely the trader may herself go to the weaver's compound in Ìlòrín or Ìsẹ̀yìn. As well as passing on orders placed by customers, traders use these meetings to order new cloth for their stocks. Master weavers show the trader samples of designs they hope will be new to them, some of which the weaver will have devised himself, while others will be samples of designs ordered recently by other traders<sup>46</sup>. Traders orders from the master weaver for their stocks may include some of these designs, their own proposed modified versions of them, and other designs they have initiated themselves, perhaps on the basis of a cloth they have seen elsewhere. A similar process takes place at meetings between traders and customers. Although some customers will choose a popular existing design or something that seems new to them in the traders stock, most prefer to wear cloth which is sufficiently like the latest new designs to be identifiably in fashion, but has been modified slightly so as to be a novel combination of colour and pattern. Since many people attend functions at which *aṣọ òkè* is worn on almost a weekly basis they are keenly aware of fashions and novel developments are frequently commented on and discussed. In placing their own orders they may select an existing design from the trader's stock and ask for a colour to be changed or a stripe to be widened. Alternatively they may bring a sample piece or even a whole cloth they admire from an event they have attended recently, using that as a basis for a minor modification. They may just describe to the trader something they have seen elsewhere, hoping she will recognize it and convey their ideas adequately to the weaver. In some cases a customer may bring or choose the 'lace' to be worn, then look for or discuss with the trader a suitable *aṣọ òkè* design that will complement it. Less frequently they may propose an entirely new

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combination, sometimes sketching it on paper. Even in the latter case however both parties share an implicit awareness of the existing technical and design possibilities and frame their requirements in terms of them.

Within broad parameters set by the need to satisfy their customers and maintain a reputation for novel designs, the extent to which individual traders contribute to this process is largely a matter of personal inclination. In dealing with master weavers some traders are content to accept the designs offered to them, while others pride themselves on regularly initiating new colour and pattern combinations. As far as customers are concerned some traders will simply pass on to the weaver whatever the customer proposes, while others will try to guide them towards what they see as more successful combinations. Thus one woman<sup>47</sup> told me "You know, because it is what she likes we will make it. Some people...maybe what she likes you don't like it, she will argue with you. That is not my business, the money is my business", while another trader<sup>48</sup> commented "If we think it won't look good, we will tell them that instead of putting that, why don't you put this colour here, so they will accept it, if they look at it they will see". A third<sup>49</sup> took an intermediate position: "I try to say, you know 'do you think ?, I don't think it will come out well'. But if they say they want it like this, I will do it for you but if it is not nice I am not going to take it back. I try to educate them because they don't know, the mixtures of those they are going to do."

### **Traders as Weaving Entrepreneurs:**

In recent years this everyday process of incremental change that characterizes creativity in *aşo òkè* design has interacted with a number of more abrupt and radical shifts which can be considered as innovatory changes. A small number of Lagos cloth traders have played prominent parts in initiating

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these innovatory changes which have been accompanied by experiments with new forms of production organization and a growing influx into the Lagos area of Ewe weavers from the Volta region of Ghana. Although arising out of the established consumer demand for new designs the series of events that led to these developments may be traced back to a single trader who became involved in the business in the late 1980s<sup>50</sup>. The woman, a former accountant known as Ìyá Ìbẹta, ("mother of triplets"), had established a shop selling aṣọ òkè in Namdi Azikiwe Street, on the edge of the major cloth-selling district on Lagos island. She called her business "Super Q of Tom Jones", the Tom Jones in question being a successful Lagos trader and importer who had his premises on the site in the 1890s<sup>51</sup>, rather than the famous Welsh singer ! Looking round for a reasonably priced novelty to distinguish her from her competitors she began to import some hand-woven narrow strip cloth from Dakar in Senegal, selling it as a new and expensive type of aṣọ òkè from "abroad," which she called "Super Q." The cloth was different because it came in slightly wider strips, 5 1/2 inches across rather than the 4 inches that was then standard. Some of it was also woven in a softer lustrous synthetic fibre not available in Nigeria. However of the extensive range of narrow-strip cloth available in Dakar<sup>52</sup> she selected designs that were most similar to the existing forms of aṣọ òkè, namely warp-faced plain-weave cloths with a variety of narrow warp stripes, some of them in lurex.

As we have noted, cloth trading in Lagos is extremely competitive. Any successful innovation is rapidly copied. Although the new wider strips were expensive and at first only purchased by a few customers, word of the novel style began to spread. In 1988 and the following years a number of other dealers began to travel to Senegal to buy cloth<sup>53</sup>. Many of the weavers in Dakar are migrant Tukolor or Serer working for an similar elite fashion conscious urban clientele (Heath 1992, Dilley 1986, Pitts 1978).

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Figure 38: Samples of cloth imported from Dakar obtained from Lagos *aşo òkè* traders in 1996. It was the plainer, warp-striped cloths, such as that on the left, rather than the more complex weft-float designs (right) which were to be influential in Nigeria.

The Lagos dealers brought cloth in the markets of Dakar, but also encountered a small number of Ghanaian Ewe weavers working there to supply the local market. Perhaps because of their shared familiarity with English, it was these Ewe weavers with whom the Nigerians established the most successful contacts.

The tendency among Ewe weavers to migrate in search of economic opportunity, or to weave at home for an export market, especially in “kente” style cloth, was noted on a more localized scale by Lamb in the 1970s (1975:188-9). As one Ewe woman in Lagos put it “We are the best weavers. Its just like you can make this Dutch wax [i.e. resin-resist printed cloth] in London for us, we go to do weaving for people.” Once they began to establish a demand for the wider cloth strips and receive a few orders for large numbers of matching cloths that were hard to fill in Dakar, some of the traders began to bring samples of the Senegalese designs to the Volta region of Ghana to be woven there, a practice that was already underway on a small scale for the local Dakar market. This became the standard way in which the trade was organized from about 1991 to 1994. However *Ìyá Ìbẹ̀ta*, the trader who had initiated this activity, adopted a different strategy opening a new phase in the

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organization of relations between cloth traders and weavers. Concerned that her innovations were being copied and her customers lured away, she decided to exert tighter control over the weavers and reduce her costs by installing weavers in Lagos employed directly by her and remunerated on a piecework basis. She persuaded a number of the weavers who had been working for her in Dakar and Ghana to move to Nigeria, where they lived and set up their looms inside the compound at her house in Festac Town, Lagos. At the same time she made access to her cloth more controlled by closing down her shop and began to sell only from home.

In early 1994 the new type of *aşo òkè*, sold under the name "Super Q," was still a fairly restricted product, bought only by a small number of wealthy fashionable customers. Although it is difficult in retrospect to untangle who was behind specific innovations two changes distinguish the cloth of this period from that imported from Dakar. The cotton and imitation silk used on the Senegalese cloths was replaced by a non-lustrous cotton/synthetic fibre mix manufactured in Nigeria, known to the weavers as "Mirai", for the warp, and a cotton weft. More significantly the weavers responded to the Yorùbá taste for shining lurex designs by replacing the very thin lurex warp stripes popular in Senegal with wider bands (See Ewe weavers samples Appendix C.) As we noted lurex has been a feature of *aşo òkè* weaving since the mid-1970s, with a growing variety of methods for incorporating it into the designs. The weavers working for Ìyá Ìbèta in Lagos seem to have been responsible for adding a new technique to this repertoire. The normal practice in *aşo òkè* weaving is to use a four-ply cotton weft, but by increasing the weft to eight-ply under a tightly packed lurex warp a ridged effect across the cloth is achieved, adding to the light-reflecting eye-catching properties of the lurex. This feature became characteristic of the new style of wider strip *aşo òkè* thereafter.

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However by 1994 the changes were taking on a momentum of their own, eluding the attempts of the original dealer to maintain her exclusive access. Other traders who had been traveling to the Volta region of Ghana soon discovered that the cloth was now being produced locally and encouraged more weavers to move to Lagos, whilst the weavers themselves began to make the move on their own initiative. The journey along the coast road from towns such as Agbozume to Lagos can be made in a day using ECOWAS travel papers even with the hassles of crossing three international borders. A number of Ewe men from weaving backgrounds who were working in Lagos at other occupations quickly perceived the opportunity to start weaving concerns<sup>54</sup> and took advantage of their local knowledge. The standard procedure is for one man to establish himself as a master by locating suitable premises for his weavers to live and work then returning to Ghana to find willing weavers among his relations and friends. He then pays for their traveling expenses, the building of looms, and the purchase of thread. Weavers are paid for their labour on a piecework basis, with higher rates for more complex designs. Lamb (1975:188) found similar organization among migrant Ewe weavers within Ghana in the early 1970s.

Although some of the Ewe have settled at areas where the masters had previous links in the centre of Lagos, the majority are setting up their looms either along the road to the border at towns such as Badagry and Seme, or in the peripheral areas of Lagos such as Alagbado, Leki peninsular, Ikotun, or the edge of Ikeja. In these districts many of the houses are partially-built properties belonging to people living and working further in the city, so it is easy and cheap to rent rooms and open land on an informal basis. In Ikotun an area of land large enough to set up 15 or so looms can be hired for just N200 a month.

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Figure 39: Ewe weavers at work in the Ikotun district of Lagos, 1996.

Some of the master weavers had brought their wives and children to live with them but the dependent weavers were there on their own. The master weavers encountered were quite young men, in their twenties and thirties, as were the weavers. All of them seemed to be fully-qualified weavers rather than trainees. Although a few Ewe women now weave back home in Ghana, all the weavers seen in Lagos were male. Most of the migrants were from the vicinity of the town of Agbozume, but others came from Ewe communities over the border in Togo. It was impossible to estimate how many were established in Lagos by the middle of 1996, but around 100 men were working by then in the Ikotun area alone, with several new groups planned. There was no formal organization, either of weavers or of the Ewe community more widely, but close personal and family ties linked together many of the master weavers<sup>55</sup>. The looms used by Ewe weavers in Lagos are locally carpentered versions of the familiar Ghanaian design (cf. Lamb 1975:206), either resting on a wooden



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base when set up in a concrete courtyard, or with the uprights sunk in the ground.



Figure 40: An Ewe weaver in Ikotun, Lagos, 1996. Carpentered looms are locally constructed, but equipment such as the distinctive Ewe metal-toothed reed and slim shuttle are bought from Ghana.

Loom parts such as the reed and shuttle are brought from Ghana and differ slightly from local versions - the reed has metal teeth rather than the bamboo used by Yorùbá weavers, while the shuttle is longer and flatter. Unlike with Yorùbá weavers and older Ewe practice (illustrated in a nineteenth century Basel Mission photograph reproduced in Lamb 1975:190) the warp is not set up by spreading the threads out along the ground. Instead a creel frame is constructed with nail spikes to hold two rows of thread bobbins. In front of this are set two rows of eight bobbins about 20 metres apart, raised on wooden supports about 50 cm of the ground. The thread is drawn out from the creel and looped around these fixed bobbins. This keeps the thread from getting dirty by dragging along the often wet ground. The method was probably developed by

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combining a warping creel developed from European prototypes with the warping method using raised sticks favoured by the Asante<sup>56</sup>.

The cloth woven continues to be the 5 1/2 inch width drawn from the Senegalese prototypes, rather than the 4 inches that were previously standard among both Ewe and Yoruba weavers. Some designs that reproduce a style considered by the weavers as Senegalese<sup>57</sup> are still woven (see Ewe weavers samples Appendix C), but the direction of design development has been to combine a greater use of lurex with other techniques in the repertoire of Ewe weavers, producing what from the perspective of Yorùbá patrons has been a continual stream of new design developments. Virtually all of the trade is still mediated by the professional traders, including Ìyá Ìbẹ̀ta's "Super Q" business, now operating with weavers still on the site from a new and far larger house. By late 1995 however cloth woven by the Ewe was widely available from almost all cloth traders in Lagos, and even, as we saw at the start of this chapter, taken by a few of the weavers for sale at Aráòmí market<sup>58</sup>.

The most distinctive feature of the Ewe cloth sold in Lagos is the production of decorative effects through the use of supplementary warp float. Although this is downplayed in published accounts of Ewe weaving that concentrate on the figurative weft float designs more appealing to European collectors (Lamb 1975, Schaedler 1987:101, Adler & Barnard 1992), it is actually a far rarer technique among weavers in Africa. Kent (1972: illustration p.67) provides the only previous description of the method used<sup>59</sup>. Interestingly when she did her field research in 1969 she found only a few elderly Ewe and Fon weavers using supplementary warps, and speculated that the art would be lost when they died. Clearly the knowledge of it continued to be passed down by Ewe weavers despite her gloomy forecast. The current lack of systematic research on Ewe weaving in Ghana makes it impossible to indicate the origins of their use of the technique, although it is worth noting

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that several examples are visible in a photograph published by Lamb of a weaver's sample book she claims was compiled "since 1931" (Lamb 1975:172.) The procedure of warp float weaving (see page 117-119) produces an essentially unwoven set of extra warp threads moving back and forth between the two faces of the cloth, hence the name "up and down" given by the Ewe weavers to the technique<sup>60</sup>. A decorative effect is achieved both by the difference in colour from the ground weave and the difference in texture. Cloth utilizing this technique began to be woven by the Ewe in Nigeria at the start of 1995. These designs differed, both in the width of the strips and in overall design, from contemporary Ewe cloth utilizing supplementary warps woven for local use back in Ghana<sup>61</sup> (photo following page). A further variation that was introduced early in 1996 combined supplementary warps with carefully placed supplementary wefts to create rows of squares on one cloth face with a toothed pattern on the reverse (See photos on following page). Although similar designs on narrower strips were apparently popular with Ewe women in the 1970s (Lamb 1975:169), their novelty excited great interest among Yoruba buyers.

An additional decorative effect that characterized the Ewe cloth was the elaboration of designs in which the appearance of thin stripes across the web of the strips is achieved by alternating two colours in the warp. A popular use of this was to alternate lurex with thread of the same colour, for example blue and blue lurex, or yellow and gold lurex. A similar effect using two colours of cotton was popular on *aşo òkè* woven in the early 1950s but its current vogue was stimulated by the Ewe weavers. A variation used occasionally is to alternate two warps of one colour, then one of the other (see Figure 43).

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Figure 41: Detail of an Ewe cloth combining supplementary warp float with supplementary weft float, woven in Ghana for local sale, 1997.

Finally, from around May 1996 the newest vogue was for plain single colour backgrounds ornamented with some of the simpler of the weft float motifs in the repertoire of Ewe weavers, such as squares, stars, and Akan stools.

In summary then there are five distinctive aspects to the design of the cloth produced by the Ewe weavers in Lagos, elaborated in collaboration with the Yorùbá traders that employ them and listed in the order in which they were utilized: wider strips; the use of ridged lurex effects; supplementary warp floats; the alternation of warp colours; and Ewe-derived weft float motifs.

However there is a further less visual feature of the cloth that is also important, namely that it is more tightly and neatly woven than most *aşo òkè* produced by Yorùbá weavers today. Ewe weavers, besides being more concerned to rectify small weaving errors, use a metal-toothed reed, and far greater tension on their warps (contrast the size of the stone weights used by Ewe weavers in Figure 39 with the far smaller stone used by Yorùbá in Figure 16), producing a thicker, tighter weave that is greatly appreciated<sup>62</sup>.



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Figure 42: Lagos Ewe cloth - detail of a single strip showing “squares” design achieved by positioning of warp and weft floats.

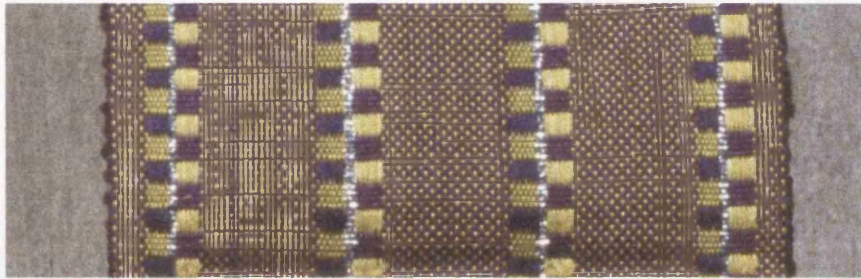


Figure 43: Lagos Ewe cloth - detail of a single strip showing supplementary warp floats and the effect of varying warp colours in a 2:1 ratio.

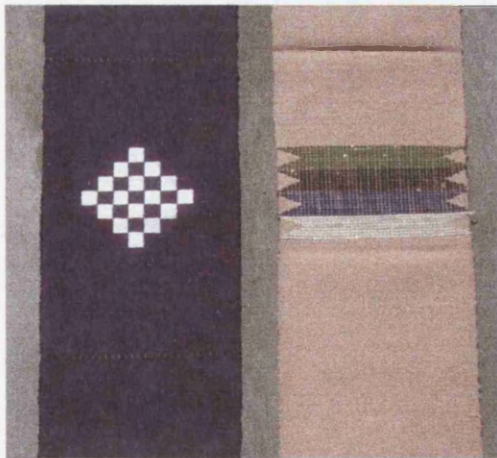


Figure 44: Detail of samples showing Ewe introduced weft float patterning. Collected in Ikotun, Lagos, in 1996 (right) and 1997 (left.)

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Although small quantities of the imported cloth had been available for several years, public awareness of the new styles spread rapidly in mid 1995. Known usually as "Super Q", but sometimes called "*aşo Ghana*", "Ghana style", or even "Kente" it was worn at many of the major "society" events that year, rivaled as the latest fashion only by another innovatory cloth we will discuss below. However many people wore "Super Q" cloth that was in fact not woven by the Ewe, but by Yorùbá weavers who by this time were responding to the developments described above. In the course of 1994 Yorùbá weavers began to receive orders from traders for wider strips. Some of these reproduced designs woven by the Ewe weavers, while others were for scaled up versions of existing local designs. Weaving wider strips on the Yorùbá loom is a straightforward process which requires the weaver to use a wider reed and heddles. Since these are usually handmade by the weavers anyway it was a simple matter to make them larger. The use of locally made bamboo reeds in fact allowed Yorùbá weavers to experiment over the following year with still wider strips up to about 8 inches wide, whereas the metal reeds of the Ewe looms could not take warps wider than 5 1/2 inches. Many of the wide strip designs woven also featured the ridged lurex effect, which Yorùbá weavers christened with names such as "shun-shun"<sup>63</sup>, "sequence" (possibly a derivation of "sequins"), and "Suzuki", as well as "Super Q". By this time the name "Super Q" in particular had taken on a momentum of its own and was being widely used, while few people aside from Lagos cloth dealers had any knowledge of the story of its origins recounted above.

In May 1995, within a few months of the first sales of Ewe cloth with supplementary warp floats a few Yorùbá weavers in Ìlọ́rín and Ìsẹ́yìn were imitating this effect also. However the thicker shuttle used with the Yorùbá loom does not slide so easily through the narrow gap between the extra warp and the upper or lower set of the ground warps. As a consequence of this and

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of lack of familiarity with the new technique the early Yorùbá versions can be easily distinguished by a considerable number of errors and the slightly thinner feel to the cloth. We have already discussed (page 117) the way weavers in Ilé Èkẹjọ experimented with ways of resolving this problem when the new technique reached them a few months later. The pattern of diffusion, with the major Ìlọrin master weavers and a few of the larger groups from Ìsẹyìn the first to pickup on the changes, followed by those from Òyọ, with older weavers, and those from more remote towns such as Òkè-ìhò mostly sticking to the standard 4 inch designs highlights the role played by traders in promoting design change. The smaller scale weavers, and those from remoter towns, being more reliant on a local patronage that is both poorer and less aware of fashion changes tend to lag behind. In the months before I left Nigeria in August 1996, some weavers were replicating the Ewe "squares" design with increasing accuracy.

At the same time as the impact of the "Super Q" design changes was beginning to be widely felt, a second innovation introduced by a rival dealer was competing with the Ewe product as the cloth of choice at the most fashionable Lagos celebrations. This second style was still more expensive, about N7000 for a woman's shawl and headtie, compared to N4000-5000 for the "Super Q", and N3000 for the best Yorùbá-woven *aşo òkè*. In the previous chapter we saw how women weavers in Ìbàdàn and among the eastern Yorùbá are sustaining the European broad loom technology imported in the colonial period through the weaving of imitation *aşo òkè*. The cloth that was attracting so much attention in Lagos by 1995 was also woven on European designed handlooms but is a different and initially unrelated phenomenon. In contrast to the modest local enterprises of most of the women discussed above, it involved a well-capitalized modern factory and plush showroom in the Yaba area of Lagos.

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Figure 45: A silk cloth woven on an imported European broadloom in the Lagos factory of African Pride Industries Ltd, 1995.

Established by a wealthy and well-connected Lagos lady<sup>64</sup>, the company known as African Pride Industries Ltd, used new handlooms imported from Sweden. Utilizing high quality imitation “silk” the company produces a deliberately targeted premium product aimed at the wealthier end of the *aşo òkè* market. The weavers are young women recruited from those trained in broad loom weaving via apprenticeships in cities such as *Ìbàdàn* and *Ilésà*. They are directly employed, with their accommodation provided and payment for their labour on a piecework basis. The cloth is sold from the company’s own showroom, but also distributed on a commission basis by many other *aşo òkè* traders throughout Lagos.

Unlike the older tradition of broad loom *aşo òkè*, there was no attempt to reproduce the form of narrow-strip cloth. Indeed the fact that these cloths were wide was their main claim to novelty, and a justification for their high price, although expense by itself was an attraction for status-conscious



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consumers. The design of the cloths emphasized warp stripes, but by mid 1996 other more complex styles were also available. These included forms of openwork and weft-float patterning that drew on the traditions of *aṣọ òkè* design but were not constrained by a need to produce close imitations of the strip format (see photo on previous page). The use of lurex also increased, with the broad stripes of ridged lurex popular in “Super Q” cloth in 1996 being reproduced. Here then something of the complexity of mutual influences and interactions in cloth weaving in Lagos today emerges. We find Yorùbá women using European looms to imitate designs woven by both Yorùbá and Ewe men (and Yorùbá women) on narrow-strip looms, while these designs themselves blend new influences into the tradition from Senegal and southern Ghana.

The direct employment of weavers by women cloth traders, who themselves supply the premises, capital equipment and thread, remunerating the weavers on a piecework basis, represents a novel movement by traders into a role previously occupied by master weavers. The traders however, fill only the direct economic obligations of the role, having none of the manifold social ties that bind together master weavers and family trainees, or even ex-apprentices, with the complex responsibilities these can imply. It is too early to assess what the implications of this might be if it were to become a major trend. At present it is taking place only in a few instances, as some other traders seek to respond to the example set by the pioneering entrepreneurs we have described.

I have not met any traders who directly followed the lead of *Ìyá Ìbẹta* by installing Ewe weavers on their own premises. Several told me this was unnecessary since there are now so many Ewe working close at hand around Lagos. Nevertheless it was her example that was cited by two women who had employed Yorùbá men from *Ìsẹyìn*, providing them with accommodation and paying them rather more than the piecework rates that prevailed for weaving

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similar cloth in their hometown<sup>65</sup>. Piecework rates were up to N1000 for a “complete” of plain weave cloth, compared to a maximum of around N400 back in the weaving centres. The main benefit these traders claimed they received by employing the weavers directly was better quality control gained by exercising a degree of supervision to ensure that the weavers beat in the weft thread properly producing a tight even cloth. One of the traders also commented that it made it easier to experiment with new designs, for example by varying the weft colour on a single strip to see which looked best<sup>66</sup>.

This woman and several others had also recently begun to employ directly some women weavers in Lagos using their European broadlooms to produce wide pieces of cloth that could compete with those manufactured by the African Pride company. This has also opened up the possibility of a new and more affluent patronage for both the European broadloom weavers and other, mostly Ebira, women using the upright single-heddle loom. Although as yet, this has also occurred on only a limited scale, Lagos traders who have not chosen to employ the women directly have started to commission the weaving of wide silk warp-striped cloths from weavers using both these technologies. Like the prototypes made at African Pride, these differ from the more usual imitation *aşo òkè* long woven on these looms, using higher quality thread to produce a thicker “silk” cloth without directly reproducing the narrow-strip format. In the competitive climate of *aşo òkè* trading in Lagos in the 1990s women are adopting a variety of individual and sometimes idiosyncratic strategies in an attempt to secure a comparative advantage over their rivals. Any such advantage is, as we have seen, liable to be rapidly eroded as any successful innovation, whether in cloth design or in the organization of patronage, is quickly imitated. These imitations however, are frequently creative adaptations of, or attempts to go further than, the original, rather than a

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direct replication. Other women, for instance, have returned to Senegal and brought back a different style of cloth (Figure 38, right), without, so far, achieving a similar success.



Figure 46: Silk cloth woven on an upright single heddle loom by an Ebira woman weaver for a Lagos cloth trader, 1997.

As a final example, we will consider a woman who has approached the linkage of weavers and traders from the other direction, and successfully managed a transition from being a weaving proprietor to the more capital-intensive business of cloth trading, perhaps suggesting a future path for others of the women weavers discussed in the previous chapter.

Mrs Adeola Odutayo<sup>67</sup> has a degree in hotel management and catering from Kaduna Polytechnic. A woman in her mid-thirties, she was attracted to the idea of weaving in 1990 when she saw that other women were taking up the trade. She recalls that she was looking for a career that would be more

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lucrative since she had found few opportunities to use her qualifications and lacked capital to open a worthwhile catering business. She served her apprenticeship between 1990 and 1992 at the Ori Ire Weaving Centre (see page 225, note 61) in the Anfani district of Ìbàdàn. This weaving group, one of the earliest established in Ìbàdàn, is run by an Iléṣà woman, and is notable for having a number of different types of European looms, although most of the training is on the local narrow strip loom.

Soon after becoming free at the end of 1992, Mrs Odutayo set up her own company, which she called Irewolede School of Aso Oke, with five double-heddle looms set up on the forecourt outside her house in the Surulere district of Lagos. She began by selling the cloth woven on her own looms by the young women she was able to recruit as apprentices. At the same time however she also started to sell some cloth woven for her in Okene. The weaving of this cloth was organized on her behalf by an Ebira woman she had become friendly with while completing her own apprenticeship in Ìbàdàn. By early 1994 she had established a local reputation<sup>68</sup> for selling good quality and unusual aṣọ òkè and built up a small but varied stock of cloth to show to potential customers. A particularly interesting feature of her output was the way in which she designed cloth from the two loom technologies to be worn together. For example a green and silver lurex cloth woven on a broad loom for the headtie and shawl was to be combined with plain pale yellow aṣọ òkè with small green weft float decorations. In general the wide cloths she sold at this period were extremely flamboyant lurex enhanced styles very different from the more restrained "silk" warp stripe designs ordered from Èbìrà women more recently. When I met Mrs Odutayo again early in 1996, it was clear that her business had expanded substantially over the previous two years. She was still using the same number of looms, with about eight apprentices, but was now also trading in aṣọ òkè bought in from weavers in Ìlórín and Òyó.

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Figure 47: Cloths designed in 1995 by the Lagos cloth trader and weaver Mrs Odutayo, to be worn together. The wide lurex cloth was woven for her on an upright single heddle loom, while the yellow *aşò òkè* is the work of an apprentice.

The stock on display had expanded from one cupboard to cover an entire wall of her sitting room as her capital had increased. She attributed her success to the advantages that her background gave her over other cloth traders. In particular since she herself knows how to weave, and the weavers she uses know that she knows, she is able to insist on very high standards of weaving both from her own apprentices and the weavers in *Ìlọrin*. When she buys the thread, which is sometimes necessary to maintain consistency of colour in a large order she will know exactly how much is needed to weave a particular design tightly, making it is more difficult to cheat her. At the same time she stressed that her wider education had made her more creative and open to experimentation with new designs.

At present it is too soon after the dramatic increase in the number of women weavers at the start of the 1990s to be clear whether many others will also manage to negotiate the expensive transition from weaving proprietor to cloth trader. It may well be that Lagos, with fewer weavers and many more customers, is a more favorable environment for such a move than *Ìbàdàn*. Certainly the particular strategy and approach to design innovation adopted by Mrs Odutayo was an idiosyncratic creative response to her personal

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circumstances. Nevertheless her case provides a further notable piece in a virtual kaleidoscope of ever shifting patterns of relations between weavers and cloth traders that have contributed to establishing Lagos as the most influential centre promoting a rapid pace of design innovation in *aṣọ òkè* in the mid-1990s. This climate of innovation is sustained and promoted by aspects of the consumption of *aṣọ òkè*, which will be explored in the following chapter. Before that however, there is more to be said about the design response of Yorùbá weavers to the changes we have been discussing.

### **Weavers as Designers:**

Design change in *aṣọ òkè*, whether incremental or innovatory, is a collaborative process involving weavers, traders, and cloth consumers. Events initiated by a small number of Lagos cloth traders over the last decade have had a remarkable impact on this process, transforming the appearance of *aṣọ òkè*. Yet the response of Yorùbá weavers to these events should not be seen as wholly derivative or reactive. Although I have concentrated on the origin and transfer of certain technical and stylistic features, a closer look at the use made by Yorùbá weavers of these additions to their design repertoire shows that rather than simply copying the Lagos Ewe designs, weavers in Ilorin and elsewhere quickly utilized the new features in design combinations of their own. The ongoing process of creative recombination that has long characterized incremental design modification in *aṣọ òkè* within the previous set of styles and techniques was simply extended to incorporate the vast range of new permutations now available.

The width of strips was extended beyond that possible on the existing setup of an Ewe loom, possibly in response to the interest in wider cloth woven by African Pride. New designs modified the use of supplementary warp floats,

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combining them in novel ways with existing *aso oke* techniques such as open-work<sup>69</sup>. Whilst many of the Yorùbá warp float designs closely followed their Ewe prototypes, as Yorùbá weavers became more familiar with the technique they experimented with variations such as extending the length of the floats, or combining them with still wider strips. Some weavers found a market for cloth using just the warp striped plain-weave background design without adding the floats. Existing narrow strip designs were scaled up to new widths, while certain designs popular on 5 1/2 inch strips were reduced to 4 inch versions.

Not all weavers were interested in producing the new designs, many in Òyó for example felt that the supplementary warp float was simply too much effort to be worth the higher price they received. Although I encountered some Lagos dealers who said they were no longer buying 4 inch strips, many customers were unable to afford the new styles. Nevertheless it had become clear that at least some people were prepared to pay substantially higher prices than previously charged for locally woven cloth. By March 1996 Yorùbá weavers in Ilorin were taking advantage of this to launch a new premium-priced style of their own, which combined the fashionable 5 1 /2 inch width strips of “silk” cloth with a lace effect achieved by closely spaced rows of openwork.

The frenetic pace of design innovation in 1995 and early 1996 is not typical of the *aso òkè* industry. Major innovations over the past century, such as the spread of lurex, seem to have been separated by a period measured more commonly in many years than in months. In the intervening periods the everyday processes of incremental change have led to the exploration and elaboration of designs within the possibilities of the existing, gradually expanding range<sup>70</sup>. When I returned to Nigeria in May 1997 it was apparent that the pace of change had slowed. The vast majority of designs on sale by



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the weavers at Aráḍmí market were simple variations on or new versions of designs seen the previous year. There were however two notable developments. The weft float motifs introduced by Ewe weavers a year earlier were now widely available in Yorùbá versions, while the Ewe weavers themselves (who were no longer attending the market) had added some further motifs but made no new major changes. Of course supplementary weft float has long been part of the technical repertoire of Yorùbá weavers, although it has not been in fashion since the 1980s but the designs created using the float technique were clearly different from past Yorùbá forms. The new fashion for openwork was also widely represented and here there was also something novel on the stalls of a few of the larger dealers.

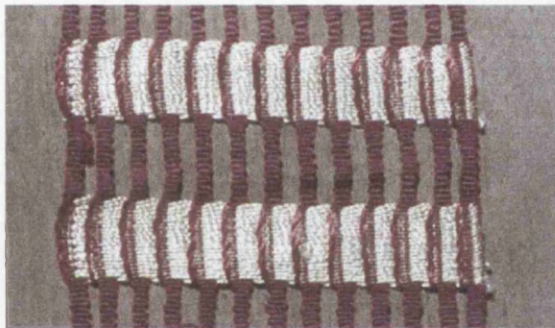


Figure 48: A sample of the wide silk openwork designs fashionable in 1997, utilising a new, thicker, type of silk thread.

The latest designs of openwork used a distinctive thicker silk thread to tie up the warp and as carryover threads, adding a weft of a different colour of the same silk in the narrow strips between the rows of holes. This thicker silk was first used by the weavers at the African Pride factory in Lagos, and a comparison of the new technique with an African Pride cloth woven the previous year suggests that once again aṣọ òkè weavers have been quick to respond to a Lagos-sourced design innovation. Alongside all these new designs however, it was still possible to buy sányán that would have been familiar to customers a century ago.



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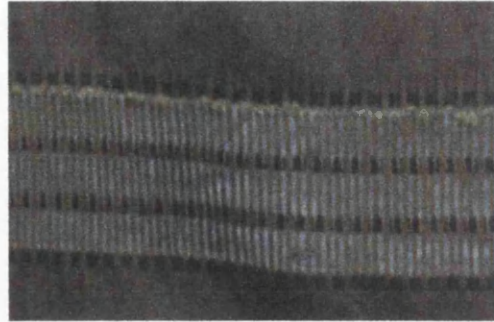


Figure 49: A cloth woven by African Pride Industries Ltd in 1996, featuring openwork created with thick silk (detail above). Private collection.

### Notes:

1. On Tukolor weavers see Dilley 1984.
2. NAI, Oyo Prof 2 OD 372Vol.III, Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province, page 415.
3. Interview: Alhaji Shittu Gbeko and Alhaji Sunmoila Raji, Chairman and Secretary of Ìsẹ̀yìn Weavers. 12/12/1995.
4. Interview: Alhaji Olatunji, Chairman Òyó weavers, 17/7/1995.
5. The Saro were freed slaves and their families from Freetown in Sierra Leone, many of whom returned to their homelands in Nigeria from the mid-nineteenth century. After receiving a Protestant education in Freetown many of them became prominent figures in both the business and missionary history of southwestern Nigeria. (See page 306 below and Kopytoff 1965)
6. The correct spelling of this market place on Lagos Island is Jankara, not Yankari as Lamb writes.

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7. Interview: Alhaji Shittu Gbeko and Alhaji Sunmoila Raji, Chairman and Secretary of Ìsẹ̀yìn Weavers. 12/12/1995.

8. The basis of market periodicity among the Yorùbá is the pre-colonial four day week. Most periodic markets are on a four or eight day cycle, a few combine to give two day cycles, while some, where the produce is gathered from a wide area, are on sixteen day cycles or longer (Hodder 1963:99). Òjé was actually an eight day cycle, with a cloth market alternating with one for local soap, but by the 1980s the soap market had dwindled to insignificance. The period for the cloth market is often given locally as seventeen days because of the Yorùbá practice of counting both the day of the market and that of the next market. This gives rise to a certain amount of confusion in the literature.

9. For example Interview Alhaji Adeniyi, Òyó, 10/11/1995.

10. Personal communication, John Picton.

11. Interview: Alhaji Olatunji, Chairman Òyó weavers, 17/7/1995. Alhaji Shittu Gbeko and Alhaji Sunmoila Raji, Chairman and Secretary of Ìsẹ̀yìn Weavers. 12/12/1995.

Since the disputes involved were so recent and acrimonious it was not possible to get details of the personalities involved or the specific actions taken or promised by the market authorities. In particular the officials of the new society formed around the market at Òyó, although acknowledging that they had moved the market to Òyó in 1993 and discussing the problems of Òjé at length, insisted that the society had always been based in Òyó. It was therefore not possible to get them to talk about disputes they were involved in in Ìbàdàn. Other weavers who were not society officials had similar complaints about Òjé but agreed that prior to 1993 the societies used to send delegates to meet there (e.g.. Interview: Alhaji Kẹgunhẹ, Ìsẹ̀yìn, 12/12/1995).

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12. These observations are based on regular attendance at Aráðmí each market day, apart from a few visits to Òjé, from June 1995 to August 1996, plus interviews with master weavers and cloth traders.

13. Kájolà is a local government area west of Ìsẹ̀yìn - there is a single society for this area including the weavers of Òkè-ihò, Ìwéré, and Ìgànná. The chairman (Interview: Alhaji Olatunji, Chairman Òyó weavers, 17/7/1995) also claimed that delegates attended from Ifè, Ìjèbu-òde, and Abéòkúta, but the few weavers from these towns to take cloth to the wholesale markets seem to have remained loyal to Òjé, so this was more a reflection of the society's pretensions to pan-Yorùbá scope.

14. An earlier example of a significant intervention is provided by Ogunsanwo (1986:44) who reports that the weavers society based at Òjé was able to resolve a severe shortage of thread in 1977 by jointly financing a bulk purchase of cotton in India. However this appears to have been a one-off response to a specific crisis. Weavers have been unable to take collective action over the more general instability of thread supplies.

15. *Fújì* is a widely popular Yorùbá music form, derived from older styles that were played by groups of young men to wake Muslims during the Ramadan fast (Waterman 1990:244).

16. *Chinchin* is deep fried pastry, *puffpuff* is deep fried dough balls.

17. Many master weavers might refer to themselves as traders, (*onísòwò*), but it is important for an understanding of what takes place at the cloth markets to distinguish them from the wholesale cloth traders who order cloth from them. The relations of production between these two groups of people and the actual weavers is, as we will see, completely different. Blurring this distinction can lead to seriously misleading statements - thus Hodder 1980:209 notes that all the larger traders at Òjé are men, and that the weavers work to their orders. In fact the men selling cloth at Òjé are themselves master weavers, with the

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complex links to the weaving compounds we have discussed above, while the orders they rely on come from a wholly different set of traders.

18. In Òyó only the two most successful master weavers have a telephone. Neither of them bring cloth to sell at the market.

19. Interview: Alhaji Keganhe, Ìsẹ̀yìn, 12/12/1995. Clearly in the contemporary Nigerian economic climate characterized by high inflation, low real interest rates and a wave of bank failures, there are also very real economic advantages in using cloth as a store of wealth. Although weavers are not always able to push up their sale prices in line with general inflation, over time the prices charged for cloth do rise along with other goods. One might anticipate that there was a risk that changing fashions would leave weavers with quantities of unsaleable outdated stock, but despite the emphasis on novelty there remains at least some customer base for older and cheaper styles. Moreover if necessary, to raise cash small quantities of cloth can generally be sold at a slightly discounted price to other master weavers or traders. Furthermore, although almost unlimited amounts of money can be expended on prestige-generating consumption, there are few viable alternative investments open to the master weavers. In towns and cities such as Ìsẹ̀yìn and Ilorin property rentals are comparatively low so investment in property is far less attractive than in more economically successful areas such as Lagos and Ibàdàn.

20. Understandably while such men are happy to show off their wealth they are less keen for it to be precisely counted.

21. Interview: Chief (Mrs) Dada, Lagos, 13/5/1996.

22. It is likely that there has been a move towards more direct orders from the women cloth traders, resulting largely from their displacement of a layer of intermediate traders, mostly Ìjẹ̀bu men who formerly operated by buying cloth from the master weavers and reselling it to the women traders. See page 233.

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23. The most common cause of these errors is a broken thread in the warp. A diligent weaver should locate the broken thread and secure it either by retying it or using a pin to hold it in place, before continuing weaving. Often however, they will simply tie the loose warp to the front post of the loom and weave on without it. This will be visible on careful inspection of the finished cloth.

24. The second hand *aşo òkè* trade is reliant on purchases by expatriate workers and the few tourists that visit Nigeria, since apart from an occasional purchase by a dress designer or interior decorator there is no local demand for second-hand *aşo òkè*. Cloths are often sold when they are inherited (or otherwise acquired) from elderly relatives. Master weavers who attend one of the cloth markets will buy them very cheaply and display them alongside their stock. Since very few foreigners visit *Aráòmí* they are rarely sold there, and most find their way to *Òjé* or to Jankara market in Lagos where there are more specialist dealers.

25. It is customary for the weaver to retain the strip of cloth that remains after weaving each "complete". There are a few traders who go around the weaving compounds buying up these strips from the weavers for as little as N10 a time, bringing them for resale to *Aráòmí*. There they are bought as samples, or for sewing into men's caps (the standard cap designs are made from a single strip of cloth.) They can also be sewn up into multicoloured cloths and resold as cheap babyties.

26. For example, the *Òyó* master weaver Raufu Mustapha from the *Alálùbòsà* district, stated that he did not have enough money to take cloth to the market, but is a member of an informal society of master weavers that shares out large orders. Interview, *Òyó*, 18/1/1996.

27. Interviews: Alhaji Isiaka, *Òyó*, 16/1/1996, Alhaji Asikolaye, *Òyó*, 15/2/1996. Although it was clear that these men were able to carry on their business successfully without selling in the market, it is also likely that they

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felt they gained some status by distinguishing themselves from their colleagues in this way.

28. NAI, Oyo Prof 1/1/1757 Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province, vol.II, page 405

29. Interview: Alhaji Rasak, Òyó, 13/3/1996.

30. Exports of Yoruba cloth through the port at Lagos to the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone rose rapidly from a value of £364 in 1878 to a peak of £12,283 in 1891, before falling away sharply again. From 1893 to 1905 they averaged only £4000 per annum. (Hopkins 1964: 249). No statistics are available for the overland exports which may well have been substantial. Eades' account (1994) makes it clear that this decline was temporary and that the trade recovered markedly in the first half of the twentieth century.

31. One official, for example, noted in 1946 that since the wholesale traders in Ogbómòṣó had ceased buying many weavers had abandoned their craft and taken to other occupations such as trading or farming. NAI, Osun Div 1/1/1006/1 Locally-Woven Cloth page 68.

32. NAI, Oyo Prof 1/1/372, vol. 4 Local Weaving. page 371.

33. NAI, Oyo Prof 1/1/1757 Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province, vol.II, page 410.

34. Wilkes, the Òyó Province Senior District Officer, referred in his report of 17/3/1947 to the export trade "through Yoruba traders in Lagos and Accra, mostly Yorubas whose homes are at Ogbomosho, Abeokuta, and Ijebu-Ode." NAI, Oyo Prof 1/1/1757 Weaving and Dyeing in Oyo Province, vol.II, page 404.

35. Interview: Alhaji Rasak, Òyó, 8/8/1995.

36. O'Hear (1984:147) citing NAK, Ilorprof 4 900/1912 Progress Report, para.40.

37. NAI, Ije Prof 4/J 1011 page 3. Aso Oke Traders Guild Ijebu-Ode 1935-38.

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38. Almost a century earlier Mockler-Ferryman noted cloth on sale at the night market in Ilorin, (Mockler-Ferryman 1892:210),

39. Ìbàdàn, where there are numerous women cloth traders in the vicinity of Òjé market, is a somewhat anomalous case since it has a substantial community of male and female weavers, but these can supply only a very small proportion of the aṣọ òkè consumed in such a large city.

40. For example, Interview: Alhaji Rasak, Òyó, 8/8/1995.

41. Interview: Alhaja Balogun, Alhaja R.Balogun, Alhaji Ganiyu Balogun, Lagos, 19/5/1996.

42. The distinction between shops and market stalls, and between shopping centres and markets is not always clear cut in Nigeria. Some lockup shops are extremely small, while a few of the more prestigious markets, such as Alade market on Allen Avenue in Ikeja contain quite large air-conditioned 'stalls'.

43. Interview: Mrs John, Lagos, 9/4/1996.

44. One trader who had recently been robbed had instructed her guards not to allow any men into the house compound. Even the husbands of customers had to wait outside in their cars while their wives looked at her stock.

45. If they order in advance the trader will try to obtain from them a deposit sufficient to cover as much as possible of the money which she in turn will have to advance to the master weaver with whom she places the order. Not all customers are willing or able to leave a deposit so traders often have to put their own capital at risk.

46. Traders instruct master weavers not to show the new designs they order to rival traders but are well aware that this is frequently ignored. The most they can really hope for is that their own order will have been completed and used before a design becomes widely available to others. Interview: Chief (Mrs) Owolana, Lagos, 6/1/1996.

47. Interview: Hajia Muhammed, Lagos, 6/3/1996.

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48. Interview: Mrs John, Lagos, 9/4/1996.

49. Interview: Mrs Odutayo, Lagos, 30/1/1996.

50. Although I have spoken to the two key players in the events described in this section, Ìyá Ìbẹta and Mrs Abiola, unfortunately neither of them was prepared to be interviewed in any detail. At this level the cloth trade in Lagos is extremely competitive, with any marginal advantage gained through a successful innovation likely to be rapidly imitated. Both women were extremely concerned to protect the details of their business from any scrutiny that might hasten this process. The following account is therefore reliant on interviews with their other traders, and customers, plus brief conversations with some of their ex-employees. It was therefore not always possible to obtain as specific information on details such as names and dates as I would have liked.

51. Tom Jones advertised his business with the slogan "Tom Jones's the store for all you require, From a pin to an elephant should you desire." (Hopkins 1964:67)

52. Weavers in Dakar also produce both weft-faced cloth strips and more balanced plain weave designs with elaborate supplementary weft float patterns.

53. Hajia Muhammed, an Edo lady who sells aṣọ òkè in Iponri shopping centre, was among these traders, recalling making several trips each year between 1988 and 1992. She gave me the only sample of Senegalese cloth she had retained ( Figure 38, left) but commented that most had brighter patterns than this rather dull example. Interview: Lagos, 6/3/1996.

54. Interview: Mr Francis Kpogoe, Ikotun Ijegan, 2/2/1996, In his mid-thirties, Francis had been working as an engineer in Lagos since 1986. He now manages one of the larger groups of Ewe weavers.

55. For example, another master weaver working in Ikotun, Prosper Tetteh, worked first for his half-brother, Francis Kpogoe, before setting up a workshop



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of his own. Many of the weavers working for both men were from the same small village, Klikor, near Agbozume. Interview: Mr Prosper Tetteh, Ikotun, 3/1/1996.

56. See Lamb 1975:150 for photographs of Asante warping techniques.

57. Interview: Mr Prosper Tetteh, Ikotun, 3/1/1996. Among the Ewe weavers the term "Senegal" seems to designate a particular style of cloth. Thus on his business cards Prosper has the byline "Expert in Different kinds of Kente Cloths such as Senegal and Aso-Oke Super Q." Disentangling the overlapping nomenclature of these developments is complex, but I have not heard "Senegal" used in a similar fashion by any Yorùbá.

58. In fact Prosper found that demand for the cloth at Aráòmí was limited and stopped going by mid-1996.

59. Kent suggests the Asante pattern known as "liar's cloth" may also utilize supplementary warp in a similar fashion, although it is not floated on the cloth surface (1972:27). An Asante loom set up to weave a supplementary warp is pictured in Menzel (1972: fig.211).

60. Sometimes Ewe weavers call supplementary warp float "double weave", but the same term is widely used by weavers in Ghana to describe a type of kente cloth.

61. At Agbozume market in June 1997 I found that warp float designs of the type illustrated were one of four styles of Ewe cloth on sale, the others being: plain warp striped designs; weft float motifs on a plain background; and kente derived designs. All of these however were in four inch widths. My main reason for going there was to see if any of the designs woven in Nigeria were feeding back into sales in their domestic market. On the evidence of a brief visit this is not yet happening. I found only two single strip samples of 5 1/2 inch wide cloth, both of which the vendor said had been woven in Lagos. Nor did I see any on sale in Accra in 1997 or a subsequent visit in June 1998.

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62. A tight even weave is one of the most important measures of quality for cloth buyers. However at the same time the thickness of *aşo òkè* in general is a frequent criticism, with people complaining that it is hot and uncomfortable to wear. The Ewe cloth is so thick that it can be hard to arrange in a headtie but this seems to have been overlooked for the time being by the dictates of fashion.

63. Shun-shun should not be confused with “shine-shine” a Yoruba term for lurex. Apparently the name shun-shun was also given to a type of imported fabric popular in the 1980s which had a ridged effect similar to the *aşo òkè*. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to identify this fabric.

64. Mrs Abiola, one of the wives of the late winner of the 1993 Presidential elections, Chief Moshood Abiola.

65. Interview: Mrs Patricia Agbakwu, Lagos, 31/1/1996. Hajia Muhammed, Lagos, 6/3/1996.

66. Interview: Hajia Muhammed, Lagos, 6/3/1996.

67. Interview: Mrs Adeola Odutayo, Lagos, 30/1/1996.

68. I first heard of her business in April 1994 from a rival, more established *aşo òkè* dealer who lived a mile or so away.

69. For example a design combined a central band of warp float with rows of openwork on each side. This design seen on an *Ìlọrin* weavers stall at *Aráḍòmí* market in July 1996 did not catch on.

70. The range is expanding, because as new techniques and materials become available they are added to rather than totally displacing the existing set. Even hand-spun cotton and techniques such as *ikat* linked to local dyeing of thread are still available for occasional use.

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

### Dress, Discourse, and the Consumption of Aşo Òkè.

*"Aşo là níkí o, Àwa ò kénìyàn."*

"It is the cloth we greet, we do not greet the person." (Ifá text<sup>1</sup>)

In our discussion of aşo òkè we have been concerned with the complex processes of creativity and innovation that sustain an ongoing tradition. We have seen that the weaving of the cloth in particular retains numerous continuities with the past, with techniques and procedures handed on within the compound, despite the challenge posed recently by novel forms of the social organization of production. Turning to the consumption of hand-woven cloth it should become apparent that a sense of tradition, of a creative selection from and elaboration upon ideas and practices handed on from the past, is once again a significant feature. At the same time however, there is an important sense in which the term aşo òkè designates something new, that it refers most aptly to a still developing phenomenon of the period following the intensification of European colonial and missionary involvement in the region from the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than being an authentic but anachronistic fragment of a "tribal" heritage that has somehow, perhaps through the exceptional adaptability of the weavers or a pervasive nostalgia for lost times, been able to survive in a degenerated and corrupted form the challenges of the twentieth century, aşo òkè as we know it today is largely a development of the colonial era and its aftermath. The very name, aşo òkè, with its reference to up [country] cloth, reflects this new orientation, being a Lagosian perspective on the interior. While we suggested in the introductory chapter that the continued salience of the three prestige cloths, *sányán*, *etù*, and *àlàárì* owes much to their prominence as 'robes of honour' in the Sokoto Caliphate, this role was mediated through the appropriation of these trappings of prestige by a new educated elite. Over much the same period the range of

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dress possibilities available in the region was transformed as imported textiles and European clothing styles became widely accessible.

In referring to *aşo òkè* "as we know it today" however, it is important we do not oversimplify contemporary practice. Whilst it is relatively straightforward to document and describe the ways in which *aşo òkè* is used today, as we will attempt to do in the second half of this chapter, to describe is not necessarily to know or to understand. Our concern with the wearing of *aşo òkè*, and in particular with the relation between *aşo òkè* consumption and design change, point us towards only a very narrow aspect of the still changing universe of dress possibilities available to men and women in the region. Dress, broadly defined, may be understood as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person...." (Barnes and Eicher 1992:15) taking in such features as hairstyles, make-up, permanent and temporary body decorations such as scarification or painting, as well as clothing. This is not the place to attempt an historical overview of "Yorùbá dress<sup>2</sup>," let alone of its place in the far-reaching social changes that have transformed so many aspects of life in Nigeria over the past 150 years.

The relationship between design change and social life is not a simple one. Although such an overview might be set alongside the account we have proposed of the gradual increase in the design repertoire of *aşo òkè* weavers, such that we could identify particular social developments that happen to have coincided with, for example, the increased use of supplementary weft float motifs, which as we have seen occurred in the period between the mid 1930s and the 1950s, this would be of little assistance in elucidating the actual processes of design change. We would be left with a few rather obvious observations of little explanatory value, such as the correspondence between increasing literacy and the brief vogue in the 1950s for weaving texts onto *aşo òkè* strips. In his exploration of the history of the concept of style, Sauerländer

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cautions: "As long as the art historian speaks of styles in a period, in a region, in a town, etc., he uses our notion for rational identification and accepts that the forms of artifacts are just one thing in a complex social constellation. If the art historian begins however to speak of the style of a period, region, town, etc., he is in danger of understanding style as the visual expression of a social constellation, which is no longer seen as complex and contradictory, but dreamt of as symbolically unified" (1983:266). When we consider the circumstances of contemporary cloth use and the input of consumers into the processes of design change, it will become clear that this warning is particularly apposite in the case of *aşo òkè*. If creativity in *aşo òkè* design involves an interplay between continuity and change, that change is to a considerable extent an end in itself. To put it another way, much the most important thing about a new *aşo òkè* design from the point of view of many a cloth consumer is precisely that it is new and will be recognized as such. We have seen in the previous chapters that the direction of recent changes owes much to the individual and often idiosyncratic strategies of participants in the production and distribution process.

It is generally held that dress, aside from mundane concerns with functions such as providing warmth, is a form of communication. For example Barnes and Eicher conclude their definition of dress given above "...displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings" (1992:15). Consumption theorists suggest issues related to individual and group identity are primarily what is being communicated, or more satisfactorily perhaps, that dress is a medium through which various types of status and identity can be, to a greater or lesser extent, both constructed and communicated. But while dress may be a form of communication, it is not a language. Critiquing the oversimplistic comparison of dress and language the sociologist Fred Davis notes that while aspects of dress may be coded within a culture "perhaps it can best

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be viewed as an incipient or quasi-code, which, although it must necessarily draw on the conventional visual and tactile symbols of a culture, does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately, so that the meanings evoked by the combinations of the code's key terms (fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion) are forever shifting or "in process" (1992:5).

Rather than seeking to pin down these ambiguous and processual allusions to create a single necessarily artificial "meaning", we will attempt to elucidate some aspects of the multiplex issues that may or may not be evoked by particular instances of the wearing of *aşo òkè* by drawing on a diverse and fragmented set of sources that have constituted some local discourses about cloth and dress. As Suzanne Blier has recently noted (1995:55) there are "four key actors within the creative endeavour", in this case the weavers and traders we have already looked at, plus the consumer (called by Blier the user or viewer), and "the cultural advocate or spokesperson." At least in the case of *aşo òkè*, in looking to these spokespersons we find not a privileged elite of elders and diviners guarding a timeless heritage but a disparate body of men and women actively engaged in a variety of tendentious argumentation and at times acrimonious disputes over issues acted out in the use of cloth and dress. In exploring these discourses of cultural spokespersons<sup>3</sup> we will encounter concerns over matters such as status, identity, gender, aesthetics, ethnicity, and fashion. The issues of the role of time and tradition with which we began this account provide a thread of continuity throughout. To reiterate, these discourses do not constitute the "meaning" of *aşo òkè* in general, still less do they provide any key to an iconographical decoding of any particular designs. Rather they explore aspects of the more diffuse allusions associated with the cloth at various times, some or all or none of which may be recalled, activated, or foregrounded in any specific instances of *aşo òkè* use.

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One of the features of Nigerian society in the period we are considering has been a striving towards a sense of equal participation in modernity, expressed in the widespread enthusiasm for literacy, development, and the other perceived advantages expressed in the term *òlàjú* (Peel 1978)<sup>4</sup>. Whilst this process has involved, and continues to involve, the formulation of new senses of individual and collective identity, it would be over simplistic to conceptualize it as involving any simple transition from a single “traditional” to a “modern” identity. On the one hand “traditional” West African notions of personhood and identity, while varying considerably from place to place, can be characterized as composite and corporate, making expressions of identity with others, and the criteria on which these could be framed, fluid and situational (Fardon 1996:24)<sup>5</sup>. On the other, while part of the nature of modern identities involves new and elusive concepts such as ethnicity, these in turn involve making new kinds of claims and statements about the past that are frequently expressed in terms of “tradition” and “traditionality.” Thus although we shall suggest later that the delineation of recently conceived ethnic boundaries is not a particularly important feature of the contemporary use of *aşo òkè*, or a particularly useful way of thinking about it, in a wider sense this comparatively novel framing of a sense of tradition in terms of a collective identity as Yorùbá is one that pervades the discourses we will discuss, and indeed one that we have adopted throughout this text. We have suggested that the salience of *aşo òkè* owes much to its ability to be both modern and part of a tradition, or perhaps better, that it lends itself to modern ways of thinking about tradition in a manner that many other visual art forms of pre-colonial origin, perhaps because of their closer ties to indigenous religious practice and disputed local political allegiances, have not. *Aşo òkè*, as we shall see, involved new ways of thinking about and arguing about and through dress, as

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much as it involves new designs and techniques. Yet at the same time it draws on and reproduces older concerns about cloth, wealth, and social status.

### **Nineteenth Century Dress and Cultural Nationalism:**

Numerous accounts by European and American travelers provide us with reasonably detailed information concerning their perceptions of elite dress in the Yorùbá-speaking regions of Nigeria in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus when Clapperton met the Aláàfin of Òyó-ilé, or as he knew it, Katunga, “the monarch was richly dressed in a scarlet damask robe, ornamented with coral beads, and short trousers of the same colour with a light blue stripe, made of country cloth; his legs, as far as the knees, were stained red with henna<sup>6</sup>, and on his feet he wore sandals of red leather” (Lander 1830:212). A few decades later the African-American Richard Campbell recorded of the Aláké of Abéòkúta “His body above the loins was nude; otherwise his attire consisted of a handsome velvet cap, trimmed with gold, a costly necklace of coral, and a double strand of the same ornament about his loins, with a velvet cloth thrown gracefully about the rest of his person, under which he wore his shocoto, a sort of loose trouser reaching only to his knees.” Rulers such as these would have amassed a wide variety of garments of both local and imported materials, the latter drawing on both the European coastal trade and the trans-Saharan caravan routes. We have already quoted (page 63) Samuel Johnson’s account of a competitive display of their extensive wardrobes by the Aláàfin and a visiting Popo king.

The dress of less exalted individuals was also described. Perhaps the best account was given by another American missionary William H. Clarke, who was, between 1854-58, one of the more thorough observers to visit the region. It is worth reproducing his description at some length. “A full-made



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dress consists of a large shawl or wrapper or toga, flowing robe, pants and cap. The shawl is a large oblong piece of cloth six by four feet and is thrown gracefully over the shoulder so as to fall to the knees or below and leave one arm exposed. The toga or gown is a very large garment covering nearly the entire body with folds to be thrown over the shoulders so as to allow free circulation of air around the body, and the pants are either short, reaching to the knee, or half length, or full and lengthy, resembling precisely the Turkish trousers. The latter garment is guided by a string around the loins. The cap is round or peaked at the top with long ears and is made of native cloth or velvet and silk. The robe, Turkish trousers and cap with long ears and sharp top are emphatically the Mohammedan dress and are seldom worn by the heathen population..... The female dress does not consist altogether of such a variety and I apprehend is neither so good nor graceful, yet it is not at all times unbecoming. It consists of several wrappers or shawls girded around the loins, falling nearly to the feet, with one or two of similar size thrown loosely over the shoulders, and a head dress of a narrow strip of cloth. When visiting or celebrating some extraordinary occasion, they present not an unseemly ungraceful figure, and are frequently enveloped in cloth from head to foot. When at work their dress not allowing the free use of their arms is reduced, and very frequently, the upper part of the body is exposed.” (1972:243-244)<sup>7</sup>.

Elsewhere in Clarke’s account, he emphasizes that the mid-nineteenth century, a period marked by wide-ranging wars and their accompanying hardships such as famine and enforced population movements on a large scale, were a time of noticeable change in the modes of masculine dress as the robes associated with the newly powerful Muslim rulers to the north became established. Some idea of the dating of this change may be gained by his contrast between the older style still favoured by the ʾIjèṣà and the attire of the Ọyó, with which he was more familiar: “The principal dress of the former

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consists of a cloth worn around the loins and falling to the ankle; a wrapper for the upper part of the body which most frequently is left bare, and a cap, in some instances a calabash suited to the head. The *ṣòkòtò* or pants are not generally worn and, the robe and Sudan skirts are of very rare occurrence” (1972:137).

With the arrival of photography in the final decades of the nineteenth century, and a number of photographs in archives from the following years, it is possible to observe slightly later versions of many of the features mentioned in the accounts left by Clarke and others. Thus we can note in a photograph<sup>8</sup> apparently taken in the 1890s of the *Olúùwó* of *Ìwó* and his court, that the king wears a voluminous robe of imported cloth, embroidered with the familiar Hausa-inspired “two knives” motif, while the two women flanking him (perhaps his wives) singled out by being seated on chairs, also wear distinctive imported cloth - in one case a velvet wrapper over another wrapper of local cloth, in the other a flowered cloth that appears to be sewn into some kind of robe.



Figure 50:

The *Olúùwó* of *Ìwó* accompanied by some of his wives. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 26, 1890s, Photographer unknown. Caption “*Oluwo* of *Iwo*.”

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Another picture<sup>9</sup> from the same period shows the Bálẹ̀ of Ogbómòşó accompanied by several wives and retainers.



Figure 51: Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 26, 1890s, Photographer unknown. Caption “Bale of Ogbomosho and wives”.

The *bálẹ̀* himself wears an embroidered *ẹ̀tù* robe, striped trousers, and an elaborate cap, while all the others are bareheaded. The women accompanying him wear two or three overlapping wrappers. The Bálẹ̀ was not entitled to a crown since he was a subordinate ruler to the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́. A more localized style of chiefly dress is represented by the somewhat later image<sup>10</sup> of the elaborately beaded garments of the Akárigbò of Ìjẹbu-rẹ̀mọ̀, who wears a beaded crown but without the then customary use of a veil to conceal his face.



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Figure 52: The Akárigbò of Ijebu-rẹmọ. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 11, volume 2, Photographer C.T. Lawrence, circa 1910.

The senior chiefs of the Fulani-ruled emirate of Ilorin were pictured<sup>11</sup> in embroidered white robes and voluminous turbans (following page.) These images provide merely a few examples of the diversity of chiefly dress in the region, attesting to the multitude of local and imported traditions, relations of conquest and power, trade and local production, improvisation and convention, that were in play in the construction and negotiation of elite dress.

If it is clear from recent research on colonial photography (Edwards ed. 1992) that we cannot accept these images at face value as unmediated

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documents of past events, Christraud Geary's work on Bamun (1988) has indicated the potential for chiefs and kings, at least on occasions, to retain a degree of input into their self-presentation and even involve the visiting photographer in their own strategies of image construction. The more marked power imbalances of the participants in a colonial situation make photographs of ordinary men and women more problematic, with dress that in many cases may well have been re-arranged<sup>12</sup> under instruction to fit in with sexual curiosity and imagery of "naked savages" (Corbey 1988), or a variety of other less obvious agendas. A more accurate idea of everyday dress may therefore be gained from looking at the background figures in some of the above images than at individually posed shots.



Figure 53: The senior Ilorin chief Balogun Alanamu.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 9, volume 2 "Tribal Studies, 1910", Photographer unknown.

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At much the same time as the accounts of dress styles cited above, the increasing British colonial and missionary involvement in the region began to provide an alternative set of possibilities. Beside the gradually rising number of Europeans, colonial officials, missionaries, and traders, who could be seen in Lagos, and in far smaller numbers in a few towns in the hinterland in the years following the establishment of the British colony in 1861, a very visible example was set by the influx of Africans already accustomed to wearing European attire. These were the so-called recaptives, mostly Yorùbá-speakers who had been freed from slaving vessels intercepted by the British naval squadron and spent a number of years in the missionary dominated settlement of Freetown, together with smaller numbers of ex-slaves who had managed to buy their freedom in Brazil or in a few cases Cuba.

The Saro, as the returnees from Sierra Leone were known, had, from the moment freed slaves were provided with rudimentary outfits after their arrival in Freetown, been encouraged in the missionary-dominated settlements of the colony, to adopt "European dress." Indeed in the Creole, or Krio, society that developed in Freetown, many people needed little encouragement to take up with enthusiasm many of new opportunities that Christian religious education and their subordinate role in a growing colony offered (Spitzer 1974). Spitzer noted that while initially European clothes were reserved for Sundays, holidays, weddings, and funerals, with time and the development of a class of increasingly wealthy traders and minor officials, ostentatious display of imported attire became the norm. Men who could afford it wore wool suits, kid gloves, morning coats, and silk top hats, while women acquired corsets, silk frocks, stockings and boots (1974:16.) In the first decade or so after the initial group of recaptives to organize their return set off for Badagry at the end of 1839, most settled in the newly established Ègbá town of Abéòkúta, where they were a major factor in stimulating the early focus of missionary efforts in



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the region (Kopytoff 1965:37-47). After the slave trade in Lagos was ended following the establishment of the Consulate in 1851, and subsequently the Colony in 1861, increasing numbers attracted by both British protection and improved trading opportunities chose to settle there.



Figure 54: "Garden Party, Government House." Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 25, circa 1890, Photographer unknown.

By 1855 it was estimated that some 1,500 had returned to the vicinity of Lagos (ibid), with many more following in subsequent years. Although the careers and fortunes of individuals took widely varying paths, in general it may be said that many of the Saro, and to a lesser extent the returnees from Brazil, were able to exploit their trading skills and greater familiarity with the ways of the colonial authorities and missionaries to develop into a prosperous new elite. Members of this elite, whether returnees or their Lagos-born descendants continued to dominate much of the social and political life of Lagos well into the twentieth century (Cole 1975, Mann 1977:52.) For most members of this group, and of the growing number of indigenes who were able through

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missionary education or trading profits to aspire to similar status, the emulation of as many aspects as possible of the life of the Victorian lady and gentleman was a key preoccupation. "At homes", gymkhanas, and chamber music became regular features of Lagos life. A photograph<sup>12</sup> of a mixed European and African group posing on the croquet lawn at a Government House garden party in the 1890s captures something of the look of the period (previous page.)

Echeruo (1977:31), quoting a contemporary newspaper account, describes dress worn at the wedding of Dr James Coker and Miss Stella Forbes Davies in 1898: "the two chief bridesmaids wore dresses of cream Bengaline silk with embroidered seams. Satin striped gauze covering bodices, Leghorn picture hats with chiffon and ostrich tops; Stockings, Gloves, Parasols, and Fans to match", while two pages wore "darkest violet Fauntleroy suit with pale yellow frilled vest and sash, silk guipure collars, violet Tam O'Shanter's with yellow plumes, yellow stockings, patent ramped Oxford shoes." While we might query Echeruo's description of the extravagant display as "typical" it is clear that both for ceremonial and everyday occasions, the most elaborate of imported attire was the norm among a growing class of Lagos residents<sup>13</sup>.

On a less exalted level the small but ever-growing number of missionary converts were also setting an example for the adoption of European dress, with modest groups of Christians established by the turn of the century in most of the major towns of southwestern Nigeria (Ajayi 1969). The wearing of a new style of clothing was a visible symbol of commitment to the new faith in an often hostile environment, by catechists, local pastors, school teachers, and ordinary worshippers in the newly established churches. The returnees from Sierra Leone were of course prominent participants, in the CMS mission in particular, with Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther only the most widely known of many key figures. An archive photograph<sup>14</sup> from the 1890s captioned "Christianized Natives" captures this new look.



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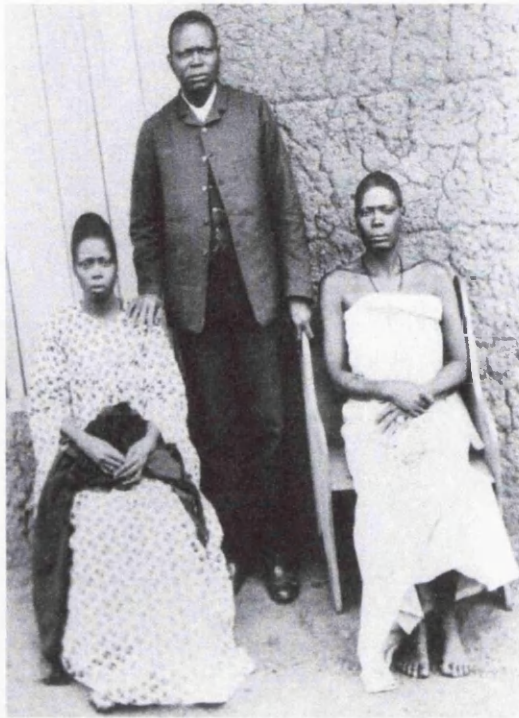


Figure 55: Early Christian converts. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File, Photographer Unknown.

It is apparent that, while it was perhaps not among the most important features of the radical changes that were taking place in the region, the new dress modes were certainly one of the most obvious markers of a new allegiance, and as such they became a focus for the organized opposition of certain regimes in the interior. Thus the *Lagos Weekly Record* of 15th November 1896 noted: "The Ilorins have strictly interdicted anyone wearing European clothes of any kind from entering their country, retaliatory measures having been taken at Ibadan, all Ilorins having been expelled from the town."

The emergence in Lagos during the final decades of the nineteenth century of a movement of "cultural nationalism" (although that terminology was not in use at the time), involved only a small minority of the educated elite, and predated the existence of the modern state of Nigeria. It drew on the ideology of a new sense of racial destiny articulated by African-American intellectuals such as Crummell and Blyden, an ideology that Kwame Appiah (1992:1-42) has demonstrated was developed in and from the same intellectual

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climate of growing “scientific” justification of racism that was becoming increasingly reflected in pro-European discrimination in the Colony and the missions. By the 1880s a variety of developments were making the initially optimistic perception of British actions and intentions in the region increasingly untenable for a vocal minority of educated Africans. The racial theories of Blyden and his followers became widely discussed in the Lagos press. Sections of the Lagos intelligentsia drew on his ideas of the inherent qualities of each race, with leading figures such as James Johnson articulating a discourse that “reveals a concern to define African racial peculiarities and a distinctive African model of progress” (Zachernuk 1991.)

Against a background of increasing concern over developments such as the requirement that all teaching should be in English, imposed by the Lagos Education Ordinance of 1882, of increasing trade competition from European firms, and of growing discrimination in the missions and colonial administration, the wider concern with racial destiny found expression in a more local context in a developing idea of “patriotism” and a new nation.

For James Johnson, the Ìjèbu Saro pastor of St. Pauls Breadfruit Church, Lagos, the advocacy of vernacular education he expressed in opposing the 1882 ordinance was bound up with his theories of the African personality and the necessity of fitting Christian education to the environment and innate attributes of Africans. To this end, although he opposed those aspects of local custom such as witchcraft ordeals and twin infanticide which were outlawed by scriptures, and even those such as facial scarification which he deemed “unprogressive” (Ayandele 1970:302-6), he also opposed what he called the “denationalisation” that most missionaries saw as part of conversion. Among the aspects of African custom that he sought to retain were naming, clothing, and aspects of marriage rules. Johnson was able to have the Church Missionary Society standing instructions altered “that the Missionaries of this

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Society in all lands be instructed not to encourage the adoption by native converts of any new names in place of the names by which they had previously been known. It is important that their identity and nationality be preserved” (quoted in Kopytoff 1965:255). He antagonized many of his parishioners by refusing to baptize children with other than Yorùbá names.

The clearest statement of Johnson’s views on dress came in Freetown, where similar concerns had led to the establishment of a short-lived Dress Reform Society. Addressing their inaugural meeting in December 1887 he linked the wearing of unsuitable European clothes designed for cold climates to poor health and argued that foreigners were unimpressed by people of different races who tried to imitate their customs. “The matter of dress, he said, was no doubt a little one, but the principle involved in it was a great one for it was nothing less than striving after independence in a small way, a principle which he thought deserved encouragement and success.” (*Sierra Leone Weekly Record*: 17/12/1887). When he had visited London “he had attended the Queen’s Jubilee Garden Party where Indians, Chinese and Japanese gentlemen attended in their national costumes, he alone being the only foreigner in English dress, a sort of nondescript personality without a nationality of his own, although his face proclaimed him of a different race. He really felt very small” (ibid). Edward Blyden addressed the same meeting, although unfortunately his speech was not reported. Johnson was still expressing these views over 20 years later, complaining in 1909 that: “there is too much made by young men and young women of European forms of dress, of senselessly high stiff collars, corsets and hats and boots and silk and other attractive dresses unsuitable to us in this our hot African climate ” (Ayandele 1970:305). As this last quotation hints, much of the concern was expressed in terms of the supposed health advantages of wearing more suitable clothing.

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If, as Ayandele (ibid) has argued, Johnson was “more a theorist than an apostle”, choosing not to change his own name or clothing, others were less restrained. The Saro pastor David Brown Vincent, a leading figure in the 1888 formation of the breakaway Native Baptist Church, changed his name in 1894 to Mojola Agbebi. “From 1894 until his death he refused to wear European clothes, even when he was in Britain and the United States. At home he was often clad in the loose garment consisting of a single piece of native cloth wrapped round his body; outside he wore the voluminous dress of the Yoruba in all its variety” (Ayandele 1971:13). He devised his own style of ministerial gown modelled on the *agbádá* (King 1986:4). Among his numerous vociferous attacks on European dress he argued in 1895 that “every African wearing a foreign dress in his own country is like a jackdaw in peacock’s feathers” (*Lagos Standard* 31/7/1895).

Leo Frobenius’s account of his visit to Lagos in 1911, his biting sarcasm displaying the virulent hatred of apparently “asimilated” Africans that was by then common among Europeans, makes it clear that the calls of Johnson and his fellow nationalists had gone largely unheeded. “They display all the outward signs of advanced European civilization....And the ladies ! Good Gracious me ! The picture hats ! The stoles ! The frocks of silk ! ” (1913:40). In 1913 another cleric of Saro descent, Rev. S.C. Phillips returned to the issue in the form of a play, broadening out the debate to embrace the growing use of European dress as Christianity spread well beyond the Lagos elite.

Despite the criticisms, and occasional counterexamples set by this ongoing intellectual protest, both the spreading use of European dress and the separate process of substituting imported cloth in the fabrication of local dress styles continued apace. A huge range of textiles was imported into the colony in vast quantities (for example over 79 million square yards in 1940<sup>15</sup>),

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although much of this was accounted for both by an increase in individual cloth use as cash wealth rose, and an extension of cloth consumption into more remote regions where little cloth had been available previously, rather than in direct substitution for locally woven textiles. An extract from Kenneth Murray's field diaries<sup>16</sup> from August 1934 captures this gradual change in the small town of Lànlátè: "there is nothing of special note about the clothing but on the whole the fashion in clothing is at a transitional stage between the dark blue native woven cloth and the imported printed cotton goods. There is not much of the tied and dyed cloth about and it looks as though the imported cloth is, after its first use in its original colours simply dipped in the indigo vat to make it blue all over. Among the men Agbada robes with some embroidered patterns on the front are worn but with them also there are a few who are wearing European clothes."

The debate about dress that was part of a wider movement of cultural assertiveness in the Saro dominated elite of nineteenth century Lagos may have had little immediate impact on the sartorial habits of their contemporaries, or on the rate at which the use of European dress was spreading in the interior. Nevertheless it marked an aspect of the increasing interest expressed by the Lagos intelligentsia in the exploration of indigenous culture and history, an interest that was to result in a growing body of literature<sup>17</sup> of which Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* is merely the most well known. In turn this intellectual activity helped to constitute the early stages of the "cultural work" (Peel 1989) of imagining and realizing a novel sense of collective identity as Yorùbá. Most relevantly to our immediate concerns here, they raised locally for the first time, the possibility of a relation between dress and a collective identity expressed around an idea of a Yorùbá "nation." We will return to this question of what it might mean to dress "as a Yorùbá" and the extent to which this involves dressing in aṣọ òkè below.

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### Dress and Oral Literature:

The study of Yorùbá oral literature has its roots in the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century. Several of the prime movers of the protest against European dress published important early contributions to the genre, notably James Johnson's study of the Ifá divination system, *Yoruba Heathenism* (1899), but also including a pamphlet on prose narrative by David Brown Vincent, *Iwe Alọ* (Lagos, 1885.) Whilst there is a consensus that oral literature has been an important feature of the cultural life of Yorùbá-speaking peoples, there is nevertheless some controversy over the nature of its evidentiary value. For the doyen of Yorùbá studies, Dr Wande Abimbola, and his many followers, oral literature in general and the verses of the Ifá oracle in particular are central to any understanding of Yorùbá culture. After discussing the all-embracing nature of Ifá verses, he concludes "Ifá can therefore be regarded as the Yoruba traditional academic system and body of knowledge. It is the store house of Yoruba culture and the only indisputable point of reference for Yoruba history, philosophy, medicine and folklore" (1977:4). J.D.Y. Peel (1990:340) has criticized this approach as failing to take account of both the way in which Ifá operates in divinatory practice, and of its historicity. He comments that "such has been the complicity between Ifa and its (largely) Christian interpreters that much of the literature on Ifa is more properly regarded as part of the same ethnographic 'total fact' as Ifa itself, which is none other than the cultural reproduction of the Yoruba" (ibid.) Karin Barber has persuasively argued that rather than being a key to an essentialized "Yorùbá" culture, Ifá is better understood as "a field of intellectual resources, in which skilled and speculative minds operate to make links, establish explanations and investigate causes" drawing on a set of discursive strategies,

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notably “narrative repositioning”, “pre-empting time”, and “lexical layering” in pursuit of “an endless self-validation of the Ifá system” (1990:197).

In this section we will look briefly at a narrative extracted from an Ifá verse, and at several proverbs that utilize imagery drawn from the area of dress. Clearly these do have something to tell us about the role of cloth and dress in social life in the Yorùbá-speaking regions of Nigeria, but while it would be tempting to regard these as fragments from a discourse of the “elders” giving us privileged insights into a timeless traditional wisdom, we must recall that elders and *bàbáláwo* (i.e. Ifá diviners), to the extent that they are cultural spokespersons, have diverse agenda and interests of their own. Moreover the nature of the primary literature on these issues is such that we have had few opportunities to listen to their own voices in context and begin to understand these agenda.

The majority of references to cloth in the published texts of Ifá are to its use as a sacrifice (eg. Bascom 1969:375.) Sacrifice, of cloth, or of cowries, or of some other offering, is a recurrent feature of Ifá narratives. The sacrifice of cloth in the context of Ifá or other Yorùbá indigenous religious practices, draws on the role of cloth as a measure and store of wealth. Even in societies such as this where cloth itself was not used directly as a monetary unit in the pre-colonial era, the association between cloth and wealth, and hence between the sacrifice of cloth and that of money, was a close one. Since land was allocated by the lineage, cloth, in the form of robes or wrappers, was among the few possessions most people were able to accumulate and pass on to their junior siblings or children (Fadipe 1970:141.) A sacrifice of cloth might involve burning it, donating it to a shrine, or tying it to a particular sacred tree (Thompson 1993:125, Awolalu 1979:49).

Texts that involve a more detailed account of cloth in use are comparatively rare. One such example however, is particularly interesting

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because it purports to describe the origin of clothing in a particular town<sup>18</sup>, and perhaps by extension in the region generally. The verses begin with the statement that encapsulates the apparent moral of the story:

*Aṣọ là níkí o,*

It is the cloth we greet,

*Àwa ò kénìyàn.*

We do not greet the person.

A few lines later the same phrases are reiterated, this time as name of the diviners consulted. The story tells of a society in confusion as everyone goes about naked and the fundamental norms of social life are not upheld: children do not acknowledged the authority of their father, the father does not cherish his children, the husband and wife do not greet each other, let alone engage in the complementary activities that are essential to the household. In an effort to resolve this crisis Ifá is consulted and the necessary sacrifices made. Eṣú, who acts here as the messenger of Ifá, collects the sacrifice of raw cotton bolls and arranges for it to be ginned, spun, spread into a warp, then woven into a cloth. The cloth is secretly taken to the family head, who is told to wear it when he first leaves his room the following morning. He ties the cloth about his shoulders before stepping from his room (the verb used, *pakájà*, meaning to throw the cloth over the shoulder (Abraham 1958:541) indicates that an untailored garment is being referred to.) At once the process of establishing social order begins. He greets his children and they prostrate before him, as children should in greeting their father each morning. Acknowledging his new attire they exclaim:

*Àṣẹ aṣọ tiẹ niyì èèyàn.*

So, it is the dress that makes the man.

The use of dress spreads quickly, even to the children, and everyone begins to enjoy a life in which the proper order is established. The motto with which the tale began is repeated, and praises made to Ifá. Others are invited to share in the good fortune of the townspeople, gained through the worship of the lord of the *Òrìṣà*.



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The text can be regarded as conforming to a number of the discursive strategies identified by Barber (op.cit.) A narrative, which doubtless was familiar enough from other storytelling contexts, is repositioned and reformed to highlight the contribution of Ifá in bringing order and happiness. A familiar and fundamental concept, namely that 'clothes make the man', is both made strange and repeatedly restated. The rewards to those who worship the king of the *òrìṣà* are stressed, and the status implicitly claimed for *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* the divination *òrìṣà*, rather than *Olódùmarè*, the supreme deity, concluding the self-validation and aggrandizement of the Ifá system.

Like Ifá, proverbs draw on the past as a precedent for action in the present. Unlike Ifá, however, they are not restricted to a body of professional specialists, but are open to use by all. Nevertheless they are regarded as the particular wisdom of the elders and a conventional formula of apology should be used by a younger person who wishes to make use of a proverb in the presence of his or her seniors (Owomoyela 1988). As with Ifá, most proverbs seek to invoke what is a received wisdom, the trick of successful proverb use being to apply the known precedent in an apposite and imaginative way to a new situation. Looking at them as we are doing, as a source of received wisdom about cloth or dress, is not of course the way they are understood in use.

Proverbs restate the importance of dress, and of appropriately worn dress, in constructing and displaying social status: "*Ènu asoṣọkọ kì í tó ọ̀rọ̀* - the mouth of a loincloth wearer is never suitable to intervene in conversations<sup>19</sup>"; "*Fila kò dun be ka a mọ de: kì a ri owo ra ẹ̀lẹ́ya ko to kì a ye'ni* - Having a cap is not so pleasant as knowing how to wear it, having money to buy an *ẹ̀lẹ́ya* cloth (see page 52 above) is not so important as that it should fit the wearer.<sup>20</sup>" Delano glosses this last saying as "To reach a position of honour and regard is less important than to know how to maintain the

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dignity which such a position requires.” Numerous other proverbs of this type refer to the appropriateness of wearing a particular important *aşo òkè* such as *ẹtù*. Several of these have been cited in the discussion of prestige cloths in the introduction (page 15 above.)

Then there are proverbs which tell us more about an aspect of cloth or dress use. The link between the high status of cloth and its use in funerals is made clear: “*Òwú ni à bá gbìn, a kò gbìn idẹ; òwú ni à bá gbìn, a kò gbìn ilèkẹ; àti idẹ, àti ilèkẹ, òkan kì í báni de hòrò òkú; ọjó a bá kú aşo ní mbáni lẹ* - One should plant cotton rather than brass, one should plant cotton rather than beads, whether brass or beads, neither accompanies one to the grave; on the day one dies it is cloth that goes with one.<sup>21</sup>” The displacement of older male dress styles of wrapping cloth about the body with the introduction of robes is referred to: “*Ẹgbọn siwaju o so aşo kọ, aburo kẹhin o wọ ẹwu: bi a ko mọ ọlẹ, ọlẹ ko mọ ara rẹ* - the elder who came first tied a piece of cloth around his body, the younger who follows wears a gown; if we do not know which one is the lazy one, the lazy one surely knows himself.<sup>22</sup>”

Oral literature is then a useful source for certain generalized statements about the role of cloth, particularly in affirming the importance of cloth in maintaining appropriately the social relationship between seniors and juniors that is a fundamental social norm. An in depth exploration of the way specific genres of orature actually function in practice might perhaps demonstrate the use of aspects of the corpus in criticizing or celebrating aspects of contemporary dress behavior, and reveal the extent to which it has continued to respond to the changes in cloth use that have occurred over the past century and a half. The possibilities of this type of approach have been demonstrated by Barber’s work with *oríkì*, a complex allusive genre of naming and praising. In exploring the ways in which the new emphasis on the brutal exercise of military power in the war-torn societies of the mid-nineteenth century was

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expressed in changes in the attributes of big men acknowledged in their *oríkì*, she examines the contrast with both earlier and later examples that drew out a totality of desired qualities conceived abstractly as *ọ́lẹ* - a “state of sufficiency, respect, and esteem” (1991:36). Summing up the achievement of this state as “self-realization” (1995:212-214) she noted the pivotal role of cloth. Cloth is both a common metaphor for followers and “people” in general, and for money - it is “one of the principal bodily signifiers of wealth” (ibid).

### The *Aṣọ Èbì* Debate:

One of the most extensive and protracted discourses about dress in Yorùbá society has been the controversy over *aṣọ èbì*. *Aṣọ èbì* is the practice of a group of family members marking an occasion by wearing the same design of cloth. *Aṣọ ẹgbẹ́* is the name given to the same practice by members of a club, groups of friends, work colleagues, or any other group. In practice the names are used largely interchangeably and, since there are no relevant differences in use, we will refer to it here only as *aṣọ èbì*. *Aṣọ èbì* does not just involve the wearing of *aṣọ òkè*, it can apply to the wearing of European dress, to matching jewellery, shoes and handbags, and most frequently, to the use of a wide range of industrially manufactured fabrics. However in the last few decades *aṣọ òkè* has been the cloth of choice for *aṣọ èbì* on the most prestigious occasions, and the institutionalization of *aṣọ èbì* is crucial to the survival of the *aṣọ òkè* industry.

According to Akinwumi (1990:171) *aṣọ èbì* is a contraction of “*aṣọ tí èbì dà jọ*”, which were the cloths brought by the family as grave goods<sup>23</sup>. Although the details of this practice may have varied from place to place the contribution of cloths at funerals appears to have been a widespread and long established tradition. In an undated manuscript<sup>24</sup> Captain W.A. Ross, who was

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the controversial Resident of Òyó Province from 1914-1932 noted: “A general announcement is then carried to all the relatives, each of whom, on coming to mourn the loss will bring one or more cloths as means permit, for the purpose of wrapping up the corpse; the number of wrappings is a sign to the outsider of the importance of the corpse.” Similarly Samuel Johnson (1921:137) recorded: “It being a custom amongst them that all the nearest relatives should give each a piece of cloth for the burial.” Although, with some exceptions such as the use of a *sányán* cloth known as “*aşo eni*” in Oñdó (Akinwumi 1990:55) and of weft float patterned *aşo olónà* in Ìjèbu (Drewal 1992:42), there does not seem to have been any specific type or design of cloth required, there was a widespread feeling that red cloth was inappropriate<sup>25</sup>. Several Ifá texts have been recorded that provide stories accounting for this exclusion of red cloth from funeral use (Abimbola 1977:49, Bascom 1969:239). Indigo dyed cloth used in this way was known as *bókù dégbè*, that which went into the grave with the dead<sup>26</sup>.

*Aşo ebi* seems to have developed from the combination of these ideas regarding the purchase of new cloths as funeral goods, and the tendency of small groups of closely linked women such as sisters or co-wives to dress alike on festive occasions. We can see an early illustration of the latter habit in the photograph of the Garden Party at the Governor’s House in the 1890s discussed above. On the left, standing, may be seen two young women who look similar enough to be sisters, wearing identical outfits of European dress (detail on following page.) Although it cannot be precisely dated the fashion for *aşo ebi* spread among the Lagos elite in the years before 1920. Chief Shobande, who was living in Lagos at the time, recalled that it became popular immediately after the First World War as people began to have greater access to currency<sup>27</sup>.

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Figure 56: Detail of Figure 54, showing two women in matching outfits.

Given the predilection we have already noted for elaborate European ceremonial, some inspiration from the English practice of dressing bridesmaids and pages alike cannot be ruled out. At any event, by the mid-1920s it had become fashionable for groups of female relatives and close friends to dress alike at both weddings and funerals and on other festive occasions. By that time also the family of a Lagos bride had spread the fashion to the Creole high society of Freetown<sup>28</sup>. It is important to note that *aşo ebi* had its origins in the use of European dress, and it was only a gradual process over the following decade that spread its use to local dress styles and to fabrics such as *aşo òkè*. That the Lagos churches exempted occasions such as Christmas, weddings, and funerals, from their general prohibition on wearing “native” dress in the 1930s (Akinwumi 1990:170) would seem to indicate that some people at least had extended the use of *aşo ebi* to local dress styles by then. The fashion continued to spread rapidly among the educated elite well beyond Lagos. In July 1938, when the Reverend Joseph Adeyemo Taiwo, pastor of First Baptist Church, Òyó from 1933-63, was ordained along with Reverend E. Atilade at

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the newly completed church, both men wore matching *agbádá* and *şòkòtò* of *ẹ̀tù* and *sányán* stripes.<sup>29</sup>

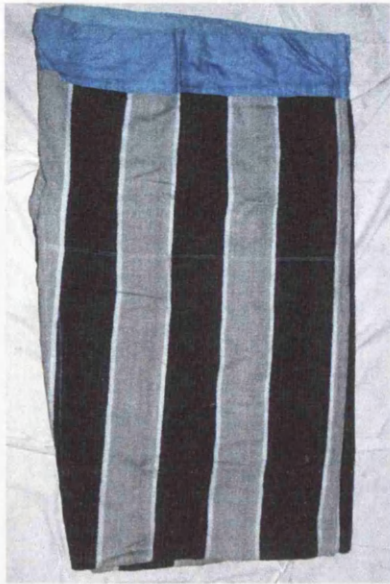


Figure 57: The *şòkòtò* of *ẹ̀tù* and *sányán* stripes worn by Reverend Joseph Adeyemo Taiwo, pastor of First Baptist Church, Òyó as *aşo ẹbi* for his ordination in July 1938. Family collection, Òyó.

Such was the association between Christianity and European dress as late as the 1930s that the church became closely involved in the disputes, which overlapped to an extent with a still continuing discussion of the relative merits of European versus “native” attire<sup>30</sup>. Although men too wore *aşo ẹbi* on certain occasions it was still largely a woman’s fashion, and the criticisms that proliferated in the Lagos press bear a marked impact of gender stereotyping, being a predominantly male critique of the alleged irresponsibility and immorality of women. The primary complaint was that the regular expenditure on lavish new dresses necessary to appear in *aşo ẹbi* at the numerous functions to which women were invited encouraged profligacy and indebtedness. It was even suggested that many women were led into immoral behavior by their desire to finance the habit. Bound up with this was a wider critique of the ever-increasing elaborateness of the parties and other events connected with life-cycle ceremonies. Since most of these extravagant events were taking

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place at least partly in churches, and were oriented around ceremonies such as weddings and funerals that had now a strongly Christian resonance, the churches in Lagos felt called upon to take action.

They responded in the mid-1930s by establishing an interdenominational committee to investigate the issue, drawing representatives from the Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, and Anglican Missions. Although they found that the fashion was spreading rapidly, and that married women were using it as a way of getting new dresses while saddling their husbands with the bills, they were unable to agree on effective action against it (Akinwumi 1990:174.) As we have seen, by the end of the decade it was even being worn for ordination ceremonies.

If at the beginning of the 1930s an editorial in the *Lagos Daily News* (25/4/1930) could refer to “mourning outfits” that “the parties concerned can ill afford” as one among many “bad customs”, by the mid-1940s *aṣọ ebi* itself was being singled as a primary cause of sexual promiscuity, indebtedness and marital discord. The prevailing mood of male outrage was captured by the popular playwright Hubert Ogunde in his 1946 play “*Human Parasites*”, telling the story of “Aduke who kissed and keyed (sic) a thousand lovers for the sake of ‘Aso Ebi’” (Clark 1974:7). As the *Daily Service* editorial of 13/11/1946 put it “On the evils of aso ebi all are agreed. The practice has been condemned in the pulpit, in the press, and in other places. What we require now is action that would spell its death knell.” That no such action was taken is apparent from the pages of the same journal two years later, when the decision by a single prominent Lagos family to ban *aṣọ ebi* from a funeral commemoration was remarkable enough to warrant lengthy comment (*Daily Service* 21/2/1948).

In Ẹ̀jẹ̀bu-òde the fashion became entwined with other more local traditions that also involved a degree of female display and public ceremonial.

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Concern was expressed in a petition<sup>31</sup> on behalf of the “Young Men” of the town, sent to their king, the Awùjalè, that complained about the premarital dance known as Idigba or Adipari, where “girls would one way or the other went [sic] to the shops and buy thick richly or costly dresses for the dance with the result that the intending or prospective husband would be called on to bear the expenses.” This was leading, they claimed, to debts, inability to meet bride-prices, and consequently the loss of the girls concerned. They also complained that “During the celebration of the Greater Beiram (Ileya) Festival, certain young mothers would equipped themselves with costly dresses most of which are also bought on credit from Cloth dealers and went out parading the town with girl-maids carrying hand bags and umbrellas and arresting people to give them monetary presents.” The King passed on these complaints, along with several other of his concerns about the behavior of his female subjects to the Resident. Evidently the colonial authorities shared his worries since they rapidly issued the Ijebu (Women’s Undesirable Practices) Order 1946<sup>32</sup>, which banned the soliciting of gifts house to house after childbirth, participating in Idigba or Adipari dances, soliciting money at funerals or marriages, and stated “It shall be unlawful for a woman to wrap her shawl in the form of a bundle and place it on her head.” (The last provision was because the Awùjalè thought they were being widely used for concealing stolen goods.) However although this Order was widely understood at the time and subsequently<sup>33</sup> to have constituted a ban on *aşo ebi*, no specific mention of the practice was made in the text, and it evidently continued unabated in ceremonies in the town.

It should be clear by this point that this discourse reflects growing male unease about the instability of perceived gender roles, in a period which was characterized by radical changes that disturbed long established relations between male elders and both young men and young women. Among the most significant of these changes was the increased social



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mobility made possible by the introduction of wage labour, western Christian education, and the relatively unrestricted access to divorce made possible in the colonial court system. It is arguable that the increasingly strident concern over women's dress and decorum that the *aso ebi* debate instituted, and which is still a notable and often startling feature of the Nigeria press today, is as much a consequence of worries raised by a greater, or perhaps changing<sup>34</sup>, arena of independence for women as a reflection of continued oppression<sup>35</sup>.

The pervasive masculine anxiety about women's dress, and the perceived linkage between female fashion and promiscuity that marked the condemnation of *aso ebi* is most apparent in an article that appeared at the start of the 1960s in *Drum* magazine (April 1960.) The Nigerian edition of *Drum*, with its pinup of a local beauty on the cover, problem page, articles on football, boxing, and men's tailoring, was a prominent vehicle in the fashioning of a new kind of urbanized elite male identity. Under the heading "Aso-Ebi: A Noble Old Custom or a Curse ? ", the writer noted: "Social functions, like marriages or funerals, housewarming parties or children's naming ceremonies, are the excuse for Nigerian women to appear bedecked from head to toe in jewellery of the same pattern, in costly velveteen of the same pattern, in native hand-woven cloths of the same pattern, with shoes to match. The average cost of an aso-ebi outfit is from £60 to £90. Many Nigerian women take fiendish delight in running up enormous bills for their outfits and sometimes settle these bills with their virtue and honour. The homes of many newly wed couples have been broken up and many husbands have been driven crazy with anxiety, anger and despair by the bills their wives have run up. Fathers, with many unmarried daughters around, have moaned and cursed God because of it....." He goes on to ask why bishops and politicians have been unable to stop it, putting the blame on the power of their wives, and concluding in apparent despair, that only a surfeit of such excesses will bring it to an end.

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How far such hysteria actually reflected the reality of the impact of *aşo ebi* purchases on gender relationships is unclear. It is significant however that the only published observation on the subject by a Yorùbá woman, while sharing in the general condemnation of the custom, was markedly more understanding about the motivations of women who took part, and more evenhanded in allocating responsibility. In the *Daily Service* of 5/2/1944, their weekly columnist Remi Ayinke devoted a lengthy article to *aşo ebi*. "The custom has lent itself to much abuse in that the occasions for celebrating marriages and funerals occur so often that one may be asked by friends to buy "aso ebi" more than ten times a year. Here is a practical problem that most men who criticize the custom do not take into account. If you buy "aso ebi" when one friend celebrates an occasion and fail to buy when another celebrates hers, you are in for trouble because the latter looks on you as an enemy.....Aso ebi is responsible for much trouble in the country. Since very few of us can actually afford to look grand and gay at every function, those who cannot will fall into all vices in order that they may be compared with the greats....All most of us care about is to be numbered with great men or great women, unfortunately at the expense of our own character and good name...The responsibility for the continuation of this evil custom lies much on the shoulders of young husbands, fathers and mothers who give money to their wives, children, and daughters, in order that they may appear gay and grand among the crowd."

We can balance this almost entirely negative perspective on *aşo ebi* with another, equally idealized discourse by a different sort of cultural spokesperson, that endorses *aşo ebi* as a manifestation of distinctively African values of group solidarity. The most extended example of this approach is the discussion of *aşo ebi* in the work of the American-educated Yorùbá sociologist J.A. Şofola. In his book *African Culture and the African Personality* (1973), he devotes some six pages to what he sees as the sociological functions of *aşo ebi*,

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arguing that it demonstrates sympathy and solidarity with the celebrant, creates mutual obligations, aids historical memory, soothes tensions over wealth imbalances, and promotes the therapeutic effect of public ceremonial (1973:125-132.) In keeping with the generally celebratory tone of a text that is concerned to exalt supposedly pan-African cultural values in a polemic against European influences, there are no references to the historicity of the custom, the controversy it has stimulated, or the gender issues that have been such a prominent feature of that controversy. Indeed Șofola uses the masculine pronoun throughout and does not mention women in relation to *așo ebi* at all. Nevertheless, while we might be skeptical of some of his more extravagant claims, and query the explanatory value of what is a reductively functionalist account, Șofola does articulate a number of the more positive aspects of a practice that has after all become an almost universally followed custom in the region over the last seventy or so years. Today, many people do indeed argue that *așo ebi* can be beneficial as a publicly expressed statement of solidarity and mutual obligation, and a way of temporarily eliding differences in wealth, even if the same people may be critical of the expense involved and gossip about the methods certain other women may use to finance their participation. That the issue is still live one, and that there are points such as this to be made for and against, was apparent from a phone-in programme on the subject held on Ray Power, Lagos's most popular FM radio station in April 1996. These concerns are among those that still inform the consumption of *așo òkè*, and contribute to an understanding of its significance in use.

### **Cloth Names and Cloth Uses:**

A rather different kind of discourse about *așo òkè* consumption is the use of names for cloth designs. We have seen above (page 151) that weavers themselves utilized a primarily descriptive repertoire of pattern names as

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recently as the 1950s and 1960s but have now largely abandoned the practice in the face of the recent proliferation of ephemeral designs. Weavers also drew on a secondary source, augmenting their own names on occasions with names chosen by cloth consumers. Like the weavers, consumers have now almost entirely abandoned the use of names for individual designs, but records of cloth names made in earlier periods provide us with a valuable insight into the concerns they associated with the purchase and wearing of *aşo òkè*. In her discussion of the names given to the masks used in Mende women's Sande masquerading, Ruth Phillips (1995:99) noted that one of the advantages of this discourse was that "it is not restricted to the privileged knowledge of specialists and therefore allows us to conceptualize the masking more broadly in Mende community life." Cloth names provide a window of access into issues associated with the wearing of *aşo òkè* by a broad public that is likely to have had only limited exposure both to the newspaper polemics of the literate elite and the indigenous narratives of the *bàbáláwo*. Moreover, I shall suggest that, like the Mende mask names, the names associated with *aşo òkè* designs can "communicate meaning independently of ...iconographic attributes" (ibid.) The discussion will be based on the unique archive of *aşo òkè* names that accompany the 354 cloth samples assembled in *Òyó* in 1951 by William Bascom, and now held in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York, and the Lowie Museum, Berkeley, California.

Cloth names have attracted some attention in the literature on *aşo òkè*, and on textiles in Africa more generally. Lamb noted that there was what she called "an elaborate system of names" for *aşo òkè* (Lamb and Holmes 1980:52), while Wolff and Wahab have suggested that these names can be arranged in an ethnotaxonomy (1995:10-12). Ruth Boyer has drawn on the Bascom collection in an attempt to demonstrate a link between *aşo òkè* names associated with kings or chiefs and the quality of the cloth named (Boyer

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1982). The presence of large repertoires of cloth names has been noted in a variety of other African textile traditions including Asante (Rattray 1927, Menzel 1972) and Ewe (Posnansky 1992). However with the exception of a number of authors who have looked at the names associated in particular areas with factory-produced resin-resist "Dutch Wax" cloths, suggesting that they function as a means of nonverbal communication for their female wearers (Bello 1986, Domowitz 1992, Touré 1985), there has been little systematic consideration of the specifics of the ways in which names function in use.

Bascom distinguishes in his accession notes between weavers' names and a second set which he calls "club names", the names given to the cloth by the consumers. This terminology is itself revealing in pointing to the greater prominence of social clubs of various types in the ordering of *aṣọ òkè* in the middle of the century. Although *aṣọ ebgé* may be translated as "club cloth", not all such cloth is or was ordered by a formally constituted club. Nevertheless, such clubs, which were and to an extent still are, an important aspect of Yorùbá social life (Bascom 1944, Eades 1980:61), were at the time the most important patrons. Cloth would be bought in quite large quantities on at least an annual basis, providing an *aṣọ ebgé* that served as a uniform distinguishing club members on such occasions throughout the year as an annual dinner and dance, and marking the attendance of a group of members at the weddings, funerals and other life-cycle ceremonies of club members.

The vast majority of consumers' cloth names refer either to the aspirations of the buyers or the circumstances for which the design was first commissioned. As we might expect the most prominent of these aspirations are the classic triumvirate of Yorùbá success; *owó, ọmọ, àti orí ire* - that is, wealth, children, and good fortune, achievements which were to a considerable extent regarded as directly translatable into each other - as Barber has shown money could be used to attract or obtain "people" (1995:213) and vice versa.

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Others refer to such values as peace and respect for elders. A significant number refer to wealth, notably to the owner of wealth, *olówó* (Bascom translates this as “man of money”, eg in AMNH accession notes 101.2, but it could equally refer to a woman.) The most popular of these<sup>36</sup> (with five examples) is *olówó níjoyin*, translated as “man of money eating honey”(ibid), but more loosely rendered as ‘the life of the rich is sweet.’ Others include: *olówó faramó olówó*, from the proverb<sup>37</sup> “*aféfé layé olówó faramó olówó* - the wind blows in the world [ie. things change] but the rich stick together”; *olówó jogún idera*, the rich inherit leisure; *olówó ní sọlá*, the rich person is ‘making’ honour; *olówó jeja*, the rich person eats fish; *olówó làgbà*, the rich person is an elder; *olówó laiye mọ*, the rich person is the one the world knows; *olówó káàárọ*, good morning rich person; *olówó dọkẹ*, the rich person is looked up to [literally, ‘becomes a hill’]; *olówó kọ siwẹrẹ*, the rich person is not crazy. Similar concerns are expressed by: *máà fowó jẹpà*, don’t use money to eat peanuts; *fowó mọlú*, use money to know the town; *owó dùnmi*, money is sweet for me; *a rí owó lẹ*, we see money to use.

Children are the subject of a second large group of names<sup>38</sup>: *ọmọ léèrẹ*, children are profit; *àárìn ọmọ yíò sùn*, in the midst of children I will sleep; *ọmọ míbẹ lára mi*, there is a child in my body; *kò se má ní kó ewe jẹ*, it doesn’t do not to have children gathered together; *ọmọ wù míf jù gólù lẹ*, children attract me more than gold; and *adélẹwe*, crown is children. Others refer to mothers: *kò sí ẹnì bí ìyá*, there is no-one like a mother; *ìyá lá bá ní*, mother is what we should have; *ìyá mi jù ìyá rẹ lọ*, my mother is better than yours. A single name refers to fathers: *bàbá bèrẹ*, father asks; and one to co-wives: *ìjà orogún kọ wọ*, co-wife fighting is not proper.

Title taking and more general good fortune, respect, and honour are also important themes: *oyin lóyè*, title is sweet; *oyin lóyè aiyé lójà*, title is sweet, the world is a market; *ọgá kẹ tọ*, a master is not shamed; *tẹmi dire*, good

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fortune is mine; *ìgbèhìn á dùn*, the end will be sweet; *ire wólé dé Ìsẹ̀yìn*, good fortune enters the house in Ìsẹ̀yìn; *enu jẹ̀ ìsékù*, mouth eats some is leftover; *ó ti gúdù*, its been good; *Àṣàbí kò sẹ̀gan olá*, Àṣàbí doesn't disgrace our honour; *ìgbà Aláfin dùn m'Ọ̀yọ*, the reign of the Aláàfin is sweet for Ọ̀yọ. Peace is also a recurrent topic: *aiyé tòrò*, the world is at peace; *Ọ̀yọ tòrò*, Ọ̀yọ is at peace; *Ìṣokùn tòrò*, Ìṣokùn (a quarter in Ọ̀yọ) is at peace; *àláfà ta yẹ*, peace is why we rejoice.

Names which relate to the occasion for which a cloth was first ordered include a group of seven named after the house openings of particular individuals, such as *Láyìwolé nṣílẹ̀*, while a further nine are named for individuals joining a market association, such as *Alimi wọjà*, Alimi enters the market. Other references to the commemoration of notable events include journeys, thanksgivings, and dances: *Wabi siya*, Wabi visits there; *àbò dé Maka*, return from Mecca; *Àṣàbí awé*, Àṣàbí goes away; *Malaba ó kárlí aiyé*, Malaba (an Ọ̀yọ quarter) extends around the world; *Arinago ndúpẹ̀*, Arinago gives thanks; *gbé mi jó*, take me to the dance. Two cloths are named after coronations: *Gbádé jókòó*, Gbade sits down [on his throne], *Asẹ̀yìn wólé*, Asẹ̀yìn enters the house [ie. is crowned - the Asẹ̀yìn is the king of Ìsẹ̀yìn.]

A small number of cloths seem to be references to aspects of modernity: *ìgbá lódé*, [new] time is here; *a nwòyẹ̀*, we are watching the world; *Àmẹ́ríkà*; *gíní gólù*, Guinea Gold, a local cigarette brand. Others are popular sayings or catchphrases: *Ọba bi Ọlórún kò sí*, there is no king like God. Some are warnings or admonitions to clubs staging rival dances: *àibínú*, don't be angry; *sọra*, be careful; *má kanjú*, don't worry. One, depending on the context, refers either to being fashionable, or the closely related practice in Yorùbá of showing off: *nsoge*, he or she is being fashionable/showing off (see page 375 below).

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To understand what these names do we must first look at the things they do not do. They do not uniquely identify a single design: the same name may be used for two or more different designs - thus a Muslim club called *Alukínlá* gave the name *Alukínlá ọlórò*, *Alukínlá* which has wealth, to two quite different designs, the first (AMNH 90.1-9756M) is dark indigo-dyed with three medium width pale blue warp stripes evenly spaced across the strip, the second (90.2-193H) also dark indigo-dyed, has a wide pale blue central warp stripe flanked by two much narrower stripes. At the same time, an identical design may have two quite different names - the first of the two patterns described above was also called *Álímì wọjà*, *Álímì* enters the market. Nor, unlike many of the weavers' names, is there any descriptive or iconographical connection between the names and the designs. Since the consumers' names neither identify nor describe a unique design, they were not used on their own to order a cloth or to convey any specific information about its design to someone who was not already familiar with it. If someone wanted to order more of a named design from a different weaver or trader they would have to convey the necessary information using a sample of the cloth itself rather than by the name alone.

Elderly weavers recall a clear distinction between names of their own that they perceive as intrinsic to particular types of cloth, and the more transitory customer names. As one old *Ọyọ* weaver<sup>38</sup> expressed it "You know, they don't name cloth, cloth is cloth, but it is what they want to use it for that they name the cloth after. But the names the cloths are having are *sányán*, *àlàárí*." To put it more clearly, cloth is *sányán* or whatever, but it may be called after a particular event. Cloth acquired these customer names from the client, whether an individual or a society, that first commissioned a particular design. If the same club ordered a series of different cloths, perhaps once a year, each cloth might, if required, be given the same name, as was the case



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with two different cloths in the Bascom collection (AMNH 90.1-9756I, AMNH 90.1-9764R) both called *Mâ rìn dọtí*, don't walk dirty.

We have seen that weavers themselves sometimes used these names for designs that they wove repeatedly over a period of time. However we must distinguish this secondary use from the role of the names in the context for which they were chosen, as part of a ceremonial event. The ceremonial occasions for which *asọ òkè* is worn are elaborate complex staged events which require the celebrant to successfully bring together a whole panoply of components for a performance which involves both an accepted formula and a degree of scope for innovation and invention. Among the key components that must be present in the appropriate quantities are, firstly, people, but also food, drink, music, money, fine clothes, and dancing, all of which are brought together in the vast night parties which are the ideal culmination of the successful ceremonial. Both in the course of the event itself, and equally importantly, over the protracted period of planning and accumulation that preceded it, a cloth name associated with a, hopefully, much admired new design of *asọ òkè* to be worn, served to verbalize and evoke aspects of the values of wealth and good fortune that the event was intended to celebrate, and, by assuaging the envious, to prolong. To the extent that the name lived on after the event, along with the memories of the occasion, and of course a tangible reminder in the form of the cloth itself, it assisted in maintaining the achieved status that the whole process had helped to construct and display. Whilst simply naming a cloth design after a forthcoming event, such as *Láyíwọ̀lẹ̀ nṣílẹ̀*, Layiiwọ̀lẹ̀ is opening his house, might be sufficient, a display of wit and verbal inventiveness in a more elaborate name such as *olówó jogún ìdẹ̀rẹ̀*, the wealthy inherit leisure, might be expected to augment the achievement of the individual or club sponsors by attracting admiring

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discussion in itself. Whilst many of the nuances of locally specific allusions are now lost, they also provide us with an insight into the past.

In their recent paper Wolff and Wahab refer to the names given to *aşo òkè* as “fashion names” (1995:12). Although this terminology is not used locally and does not really grasp the role of the names we have been discussing above, it is a useful way of thinking about a minority of names which, while originating in the same way, took on a wider salience. It also most closely approaches the residual function of the small repertoire of names still in active use today. Certain design names given to *aşo òkè* in the past took on a momentum of their own, that overlapped with but was to an extent separable from the specific designs to which they were first applied. The most common of these were the names of popular politicians such as *Qbafemi Awolowo*, and later *Muritala Mohammed*. Others were taken from nationally known events, or from popular songs. Whilst these names may have been initiated by one or more orders for cloth, in the case of personal names, on behalf of the persons concerned, such was the popularity of the individuals that the fashion for cloths named *Qbafemi* or *Muritala* would spread far more widely than the details of the design to which it was initially applied. Similarly the knowledge that there was a fashionable cloth called *miliki*, named after a hit song in the 1970s, spread to the extent that it was applied to a wide range of multicoloured warp-striped cloths, without it being possible to identify which, if any was the original. To the extent that names of this type were linked to a particular pattern this was largely a local association, as with the variations on a design named *Qbafemi* in the *Bascom* collection. Traders would of course be able to take advantage of this by insisting to a customer that whatever new design they had in stock was in fact the fashionable *Muritala* or whatever that everyone was talking about.

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Although it is still open to those who are organizing ceremonies or society events to name the *aṣọ òkè* they commission, few people now choose to do so. Like the weavers, few customers today are concerned with cloth names as such<sup>40</sup>. What they are still very interested in is fashionable new types of cloth, and the names of these, like the “fashion names” of the 1960s and 1970s, can still develop their own distinct trajectories. Thus in 1995 many people knew that the latest Lagos fashion was for a cloth called “Super Q” but few knew what it actually looked like. The name “Super Q”, circulating rapidly in a society where many people have only basic literacy skills and limited familiarity with English, began to be elided with all sorts of similar sounding words, such as “Suzuki” (a type of moterbike), “sequence” and “shun-shun.” Similar things happen with the names of new colours, which in recent years have been far more significant in *aṣọ òkè* fashion than pattern names - *fuchsia*, for example, had mutated into “official.”

Margaret Drewel (1992) has recently alerted us to the importance of play and improvisation in even the most sacred areas of Yorùbá culture. Rather than seeing the names that were given to *aṣọ òkè* by its consumers as a system, with all the regularity and predictability that that term implies, it is better to understand them as another field of play, as a verbal resource on which participants could draw to augment their ceremonial occasions, often following past precedents but with plenty of scope for witty improvisations. That certain names or types of names reoccurred frequently, is more due to the shared concerns of the celebrants and to their familiarity with past naming practice than to any overarching regularity. In turn records of these names are a valuable resource enabling us to look back and uncover at least some of the broad outlines of the issues that mattered to those preparing to wear *aṣọ òkè* forty or fifty years ago.

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### Dressing in Aşo Òkè in the 1990s:

Performance has been described as a sense of slightly heightened behavior, of "twice-behaved behavior" (Schechner 1993:1). Now that aşo òkè is no longer purchased to be part of normal everyday attire, the decision to buy and wear hand-woven cloth can take on a similar air of something heightened, of an additional layer of significance beyond that attached to more mundane dress, and this layer may evoke an awareness of the past, a consciousness of participating in a tradition. This adds a layer of associations to those that would have been involved in an earlier era. Among the ideas associated with aşo òkè within this evolving tradition, as we have seen, are wealth and good fortune, the importance of appropriate dress in the maintenance of a social hierarchy, an interplay, which at least for some has been charged with ideological significance, between supposedly indigenous and European modes of dress, and an often acrimonious debate over the proprieties of women's attire. Earlier these discourses were described as relating to layers of allusions that underly<sup>e</sup> aşo òkè use. After we have looked at the ways in which aşo òkè is consumed today, we will conclude this chapter by considering the extent to which these concerns, and other issues with which the cloth has been associated, such as fashion and ethnicity, do actually surface to inform real activity.

In the 1990s new aşo òkè is bought for a range of ceremonial occasions. Beyond these occasions, which we may distinguish as the primary use, the cloth may be reworn to a number of lesser events, or even find its way into certain types of everyday use. On these later secondary uses, an evocation of the original event for which it was obtained may be added to the more generalized sense of the past recalled. Cloth may also be stored and

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accumulated, and eventually passed on to one's children, serving as a mnemonic device marking key events in family history.

Although there are numerous different events for which *aşo òkè* would be considered suitable attire, including naming ceremonies, birthday parties, academic award ceremonies, the conferment of titles, church festivals, Islamic holy days, town festivals, club dinners and dances, etc., there are two major ceremonial events in particular for which large numbers of participants will purchase new *aşo òkè*, namely marriages and funerals. We will concentrate here on these.

Marriage ceremonies in southern Nigeria today are complex hybrid events, that blend aspects of family and local traditions with religious and civil ceremonial. Such is the extreme variety of details arising out of customs that may vary in the two families involved as well as by locality, together with the wide variety of religious affiliations, that any attempt to construct a normative account of a "typical" Yorùbá wedding would be a highly artificial and misleading exercise. Nevertheless there are certain common features that regularly occur. There are three distinct ways of solemnizing a marriage, one, two, or frequently all three of which may be used. Firstly there is the so-called "traditional wedding" involving a public prestation of a range of symbolic and material gifts by the groom's family to the bride's family. The specific form of this event varies, but it usually involves a ceremony at the bride's house, at which the groom and a group of his friends will prostrate in front of the bride's family and request her hand, witnessed by assemblies of guests from both sides. This event is adapted from older marriage practices which themselves varied considerably from family to family<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, there is the civil ceremony, at which the couple will be issued with an official marriage certificate by the relevant local authorities. Thirdly there is the church ceremony or blessing of the wedding at the mosque.

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Although a process analogous to engagement was part of the early stages of the exchange of meetings and gifts between families in the long procedures that established a wedding by local custom, the European notion of engagement as a publicly marked event has largely been assimilated to the “traditional wedding” itself. A couple will have been regarded as engaged, a variety of preliminary meetings and messages exchanged between the families, and in some cases, an engagement ring given, over a period of several months before, but a common practice today is to hold the engagement ceremony, in the form of the “traditional wedding” on a Saturday, to be followed by a brief visit to the local government offices to register the marriage at some point during the week, and the church ceremony the subsequent Saturday.

Aşo òkè plays two roles, a private and a public one, in this series of events. Firstly it is an essential part of the package of gifts made by the groom’s family to the bride on the day of the engagement ceremony. A number of these gifts are primarily symbolic, including such items as “alligator” pepper, honey, yams, (with a tendency to incorporate the European idea of “something old, something new,” etc.) Others however include a quantity of new clothes, shoes, handbags, etc. for the bride. The amount and quality of these obviously varies with the wealth of the families involved, but is also widely thought to be a gauge of the mother-in-law’s true enthusiasm for the new bride. Among these clothes should be at least one or two “completes” of aşo òkè, plus several sets of good quality “lace.” In the past there were a number of local customs which prescribed that these gifts should include certain specific patterns of aşo òkè, such as *sányán* or the mixed stripe pattern (see photo in Lamb and Holmes 1980:38) used in Ìlọrin. The bride would then have worn these cloths for some time after she was brought to the groom’s family compound. Today however any fashionable design may be chosen and the cloth is not intended for use on any particular occasion.

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The public display of *aşo òkè* takes place at the two main ceremonies, the engagement and the church wedding, and at the parties that follow them. At the engagement it is common for the bride and groom to be dressed in outfits made from the same pattern of *aşo òkè* - in 1995-96 designs with lots of gold lurex seemed particularly popular. The bride will usually wear a "complete" consisting of four cloths: the *iró*, a large wrapper of 17 strips of four inch wide cloth<sup>42</sup>, which is folded over and wrapped around the waist; the *ipèlè*, a second smaller wrapper cloth made of 10 strips, which may be worn around the waist over the *iró* or tied higher over the breasts, or more often folded over one shoulder; the *bùbá*, a loose blouse made from 5 strips of cloth; and the *gèlè*, or headtie, made from 7 strips. The groom's outfit will be made up of a pair of wide trousers, *şòkòtò*, a long loose fitting tunic, also usually called a *bùbá*, a robe, *agbádá*, and a cap, *filà*. The number of strips needed for these varies somewhat depending on the style of robe desired. Both the *agbádá* and the *bùbá* are usually decorated with machine-sewn embroidery.

The parents of the bride, and the parents of the groom, may, if they have appropriate garments, choose to distinguish themselves by wearing old sets of *sányán* or *etu* cloths and robes. More commonly though, they may be distinguished from the other close relatives by wearing complete outfits of the *aşo òkè* selected as *aşo ebi* by their respective families, rather than the partial sets worn with lace by others.

Despite the controversy over *aşo ebi* discussed above the custom is followed today at virtually all Yorùbá engagements, weddings, and funerals. Typically at an engagement ceremony there will be an *aşo ebi* for the bride's side, and a second, different coloured cloth selected for the groom's side. At larger and more elaborate events there may be numerous other groupings distinguished by different patterns, such as for example, a distinction between relatives and family friends, or different patterns for the young friends of the

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bride and/or groom, or for members of a particular club to which one or more of the parents belongs. For example at an engagement in Lagos in May 1995 the bride and groom were wearing matching outfits of bronze and gold lurex warp stripes; the bride's mother's family wore orange cotton with green and gold warp stripes; the bride's father's family wore yellow cotton with black supplementary weft float; the bride's friends wore turquoise silk with a central gold lurex wrap stripe; while the groom's side wore purple silk with silver lurex warp stripes.

Rather than wearing the entire outfit of *aşo òkè* that is normal for the bride and groom, it is currently the fashion for the guests at a ceremony to combine *aşo òkè* with some form of "lace". For women this will involve wearing lace, (which is most commonly white or a pastel shade), for the *bùbá* (blouse) and *iró* (wrapper), with a *gèlè* (headtie) and *ipélé* (shawl) of *aşo òkè*. Men will normally wear just the *filà*, cap, of *aşo òkè*, using lace or brocade for their robes and trousers. The reason normally given for this is that people find it uncomfortably hot wearing an entire outfit of thick *aşo òkè*, whereas lace is generally far lighter and often has extensive openwork.

Sometime closely following the engagement, often the following Saturday, a church wedding will be held if the families involved are Christians, or arrangements will be made to have the union blessed at a mosque. New sets of *aşo òkè* of different designs will be worn by much the same groups of participants, although it is common for the bride and groom themselves to attend the church wedding in European attire of wedding dress and morning suit. This may be followed by a larger gathering for a lengthy wedding meal, either at the bride's family house, or for wealthier families, at one of the large halls at places such as the National Theatre and Muson in Lagos that are hired out each weekend. Following either the engagement or the wedding, or in many cases both, there will be a vast "night party."



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Like weddings, funerals can also be protracted events, with the exact programme and details of procedure varying with the particular traditions and circumstances of the family involved. Accounts of funeral customs in the literature<sup>43</sup> make it apparent that there were substantial regional variations. Both Christian and Muslim funerals incorporate varying amounts from local traditions into contemporary practice. Since Islamic doctrine prescribes a rapid burial many of the observances associated with the Christian practices, to be outlined below, are omitted, but one or more large parties may still be held when considered appropriate. The degree to which a funeral will be marked by public ceremonial depends to a considerable extent on the age of the deceased, with only those people who die in their late 60s or older, with a full complement of children and grand children, being considered to have completed a full life that should be properly celebrated. Related to this is the widely held view that only junior relatives, whether children or younger siblings, should be involved in burying someone if the proper order of life and death is to be preserved.

Among wealthy families it is now common to announce the death through a full-page notice in one or more of the daily newspapers, or even on the television or radio. A photograph of the deceased will be accompanied by a few words of eulogy and the schedule for the funeral arrangements. Five days or so before the actual burial a series of wake-keeping events will begin at the deceased's house, continuing each day. If the dead person was a member of one or more societies each may be allocated a particular day, on which as many members as possible will visit the wake-keeping. Often these society members will wear the most recent *aşo ebi* the society has purchased, which in the case of wealthy groups will often be of *aşo òkè*. The day preceding the funeral a general wake-keeping may be held in the early evening at which one or more pastors may lead singing, praying, and

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depending on the denomination, drumming. After a couple of hours or so the priests will leave and a period known as social wake-keeping, involving much singing, drumming, and often chanting of *oríkì*, begins. This may go on until midnight or dawn. Some families choose to wear an *aşo ẹbi* for this final session of wake-keeping. On the morning of the interment the children of the deceased go to collect the body from the mortuary, bringing it back to the family house where it will lie in state for several hours. Flowers, and cloths such as brocades and lace, but not *aşo òkè*, may be used to decorate the room where the coffin lies. The body itself is usually dressed in white cloth. The family and a few close friends will then dress in *aşo òkè* to accompany the coffin to the church for a funeral service, followed by the burial ceremony. The children of the deceased may choose to celebrate the successful life of their parent by choosing a cloth such as *sányán* or *ẹtù* to wear for this occasion, although any other *aşo òkè* would also be regarded as appropriate<sup>44</sup>. It can be suggested that with someone who dies at a sufficient age to warrant an elaborate funeral but is still not really considered old enough to have fulfilled his or her life, *sányán* or similar “big” cloths are inappropriate. Often the grandchildren will be distinguished by wearing a second *aşo òkè*, and the great-grandchildren, if any, by a third. Such is the association between mourning and the wearing of fine cloth that a proverb can use “cloth wearers” as a euphemism for mourners: *okú ńsunkún okú, akáşo lérí ńsunkún araawọn*, “the dead mourn the dead, the people who are wearing cloth mourn for each other” (Abraham 1958:467)

Following the burial ceremony, the family will return to their house to entertain guests, with, if finances permit, a large celebration or “night party” being held. A further *aşo ẹbi* is often worn for this celebration - sometimes this will also be an *aşo òkè*, but many families prefer to use a less expensive cloth such as resin-resist “ankara.” Guests at any stage of these events are not

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usually expected to wear the *aşo ẹbi* chosen by the family, but may mark the occasion by wearing another *aşo òkè* that they already own. After the burial day further remembrances, which may be marked by church services, distribution of cooked food, particularly *àkàrà* (fried beancakes), and sometimes a further party, may be held on the 3rd day, the following Sunday, the 7th or 8th day, the 40th day, and subsequent annual anniversaries.

The older custom of actually bringing *aşo òkè* to be buried with the body seems to have been abandoned, in Lagos at least, by the 1940s, although one older informant recalls<sup>45</sup> that it was especially the mothers of the deceased, ie. his mothers family, who would each give one of their cloths saying 'this is our cloth for you to take to heaven'.

A full programme of funerary arrangements can therefore involve the family members in wearing at least one, and up to three different sets of *aşo òkè*, adding further to the costs of what are already extremely expensive celebrations that frequently result in the incurring of substantial debts. As with weddings, the culminating event of a major funeral will be a "night party" at which one of these sets of cloth may be worn.

### **The Night Party**

The night party is in many ways the fulfillment of the "social life" of *aşo òkè*, the grand event for which it is ultimately intended. A night party may, depending on the wishes and resources of the celebrants, be held once or twice in the course of the engagement/wedding process, as the climax of a large funeral, to mark a child's naming, the awarding of a chieftaincy title or an important promotion, the establishment of a new business, the opening of a new house, a 60th birthday party, or any other major event that an individual or family decides to celebrate. With the straightened economic circumstances

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of recent years they are not held as frequently as they were, but are still regular events in all Yorùbá towns and cities. Each weekend numerous car loads of guests travel out from Lagos or Ìbàdàn to attend night parties in their natal towns or the family compounds of close friends.

Waterman (1990:170) notes two Yorùbá terms often used for night party: *àríyá*, a term which Abraham (1958:64) translates as “cheerfulness, jollification”, and *ipàdè*, a coming together of people (1958:540). He argues: “these two terms map the cultural significance of urban Yorùbá celebrations: they generate happiness (*inún dídùn*, “sweet-stomachedness”) and pleasure (*ìgbádùn*, “sweetness reception”), and draw together multiple strands of kinship, patronage, and friendship, actualizing and publicizing a sensual social universe centred on the host(s)” (1990:170-1). To these term/however we can add a third, *ẹbọ òru*, sacrifice of the night<sup>46</sup>, which alludes to the role of a night party in sharing one’s good fortune in a sacrifice that is intended to avert any malice or envy it may have aroused.

Whatever the wealth of the participants it is usual for the night party to be as large and elaborate an occasion as possible, involving the maximum amount of people that can be fed and entertained. Several thousand invited guests are standard, and many more will be drawn by the loud music and the gathering crowd. Although in the large clubs and restaurants whose grounds are regularly hired for the staging of night parties by the affluent in Lagos, it is now essential for security reasons to have armed guards at the gates, at less elaborate occasions in the family compounds and back streets of towns and cities it is expected that food and drink will be distributed to all who wish to attend. In Òyó, for example, a large party would draw the entire population of the neighbourhood, from elders to small children. Rows of hired seats and tables are set out in front of the stage and dancing area, with the most advantageous positions carefully reserved for prominent guests.

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A night party will begin to get going around eleven or twelve p.m., with guests continuing to arrive until one or so. Several cows will have been killed. Hired staff, or at smaller events the wives and younger women of the family, distribute food such as meat, chicken, *moin-moin* (steamed bean cake), and the ubiquitous jollof rice, together with bottles of beer and Coke. Music is a key feature in setting the right mood for the occasion and the hired band will play virtually nonstop throughout the night. In Lagos and Ìbàdàn the music favoured by the wealthy is usually *jùjú* (Waterman 1990), with star musicians such as King Sunny Ade, Sir Shina Peters, or a recent favourite known as Swing Pawpaw, being hired to perform at parties almost every weekend. For those who cannot afford such established and expensive groups there are numerous more locally known bands playing in a similar style. In Òyó and other towns the preferred music is usually *fújì*, a widely popular Islamicized style. Whatever the type of music, the musicians are expected to “recognise” prominent guests as they arrive and praise them by name, drawing out the praises as extravagantly as possible and generally being immediately rewarded with a flow of cash from the recipient of their attentions.

The extent to which guests at a night party wear *aşo òkè* depends largely on the occasion. If it is to mark an engagement or wedding where large numbers have taken one or more *aşo òkè* as *aşo ebi* this will be worn, with a variety of lace fabrics, to the night party. Often the various groups distinguished by their *aşo ebi*, such as the friends of the groom, will be seated together, so the gathered crowd may be marked out in blocks of colours. For many other events however, such as naming ceremonies, or a seventieth birthday party, only the immediate participants will have bought a new *aşo òkè*. However all the guests will be finely dressed in the most expensive and fashionable cloths they can muster - lace, satin brocade, organza, guipure - tailored into flowing *agbádá* for the men, into blouse, wrapper, headtie, and

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shawl for the women. Many women chose occasions such as this to wear again a shawl and headtie of *aşo òkè* they have recently bought for another occasion, particularly if it is of a similar colour to the chosen *aşo ebi*. If one of the main celebrants belongs to a social club that has recently brought an *aşo ebi* many of his or her fellow club members will turn up wearing this cloth, which again is often *aşo òkè*.

Cloth is, as we have seen, a popular metaphor, both for wealth, and for people. The climax of a night party brings all three of these elements together in a public demonstration of the celebrant's success. The main celebrant, with his or her immediate family, will be called up on the stage by the praises of the musicians. As these praises roll on he or she dances in front of the band leader "spraying" them with cash, peeling off notes one by one from a thick wad of naira, or even in some cases US\$ bills, and pressing them to the man's forehead so they flutter to the ground around him. After this public display of generosity has gone on for some time the focus will shift from the bandleader to the celebrant and a growing circle of family and guests press in, masking him in the throng of people, showering money down onto him, the silk and lurex in their cloths shimmering under the lights. Cloth, money, and people, are brought together in a very public expression of the process Barber has called "self realization", the "productive interactions between generosity, social salience, and the encircling gaze of admiring adherents" (1995:214), enacting the expected link between giving and receiving anew, the *ebo òru*, night sacrifice, that the whole occasion embodies.

### **The Purchase of *Aşo Òkè*:**

Having explored the occasions for which new *aşo òkè* is bought we now need to consider the details of the purchasing process. The responsibility

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for selecting the cloth to be worn, and for organizing its purchase and distribution falls to the senior women involved in the ceremony, often the mothers of the bride and groom in the case of an engagement and wedding. Since these are the occasions for which the largest quantities of *aşo òkè* are bought they will be the focus here, but the procedure for other events is similar apart from the usually smaller number of cloth “completes” required, and in the case of unanticipated events such as funerals, the accelerated timetable.

As much as six months before the event is due to be held, the woman will begin to visit the cloth dealer or dealers she usually uses to look at the range of designs. Frequently she will bring two or three friends with her and sit down for some time discussing and considering their choice or choices. From my own discussions with women it was clear that the first question most people resolved was what colour to select. Some liked to follow the practice, which is clearly of recent Euro-American inspiration, of choosing a bluish colour if they were looking for the groom's side, but a pink for the bride's. Elaborating on this idea it was suggested that yellow or green were also appropriate for the groom and shades such as pink or fuchsia for the bride. A second consideration is to assess what colours are currently fashionable. Particularly in the last few years before the design innovations associated with “Super Q”, colour was a primary feature in *aşo òkè* fashion, with shades such as turquoise, orange, yellow, fuchsia, and peach each enjoying brief vogues in the early 1990s. Each of these was still being woven in 1995-6 but the focus of the more fashionable had shifted to other features such as the width of strips. Finally, in selecting a colour, the woman's individual preferences play an important part - one lady told me she had chosen yellow for her son's wedding

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because she was determined to use a set of yellow shoes and matching handbag she had bought the last time she was in London.

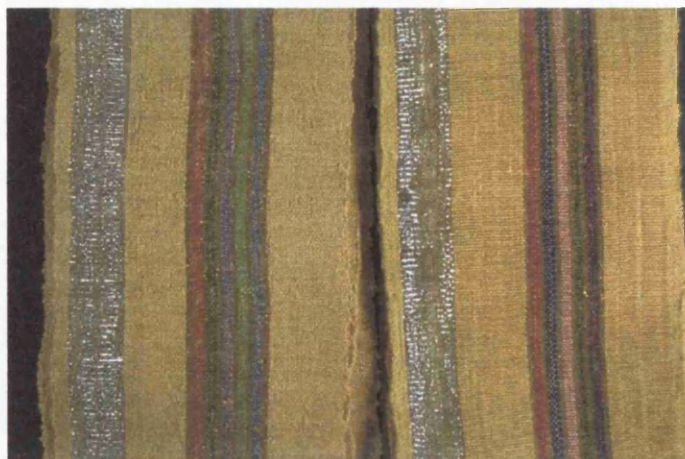


Figure 58: A pattern of aṣọ òkè woven in cotton (left) and more expensive artificial "silk" (right).

The next thing to consider is the expense of the cloth. Since the intention is that the *aṣọ ebi* will be worn by the largest possible number of relatives and friends the woman must consider not only her own resources but those of the other recipients. There is clearly no point in selecting the most fashionable and expensive style if only five people are going to be able to afford it, or more likely, if many of the people who buy it will be grumbling and complaining about the cost. The major factor affecting cost is the materials used. Since the late 1980s it has become popular to use artificial "silk" for the warp of some cloths, creating two categories of aṣọ òkè, the basic cotton and the more expensive "silk." Thus in 1994, for example, a "complete" of cotton cloth would have cost in the vicinity of N1000-1200, while a similar design in "silk" was N2500-3000. This made it possible either to choose the cloth appropriate to the resources of the expected guests, or, as some women did, to order the cloth with an identical design in both cotton and "silk", allowing people to choose whichever they could afford. Subsequently with the greater range of cloths in use more complex strategies became possible. Warp float cloth for example cost significantly more if one chose the neater and thicker



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version produced by Ewe weavers in Lagos, than an identical pattern woven by Yorùbá in Ìlọ́rín (perhaps N4000 for the ten strips needed for a shawl and headtie, compared with about N2500 for an Ìlọ́rín version.) At one wedding ceremony I attended in Lagos in 1995, the groom's mother, who was herself a cloth trader, had unusually chosen two *aşo ẹbi* to be worn together. For the shawl and headtie women guests could choose between 5 1/2 inch wide strips of yellow and black cloth (at an already expensive N3500, then around US \$40 ) and the identical design woven in the visibly thicker and finer broadcloth from the African Pride company (at a startling N7000 for the two pieces.) They could then opt to also ~~take~~ the pale blue silk openwork *aşo òkè* she had selected for the wrapper and blouse, costing a further N5000.



Figure 59: A wedding guest in *aşo ẹbi*, 1995. From the options described above she wears the blue "silk" openwork, combined with the cheaper of two alternative yellow and black cloths.

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The specific pattern to be woven is only the final consideration after the woman has selected the colour, price range and associated techniques and materials. It is at this point that the customer's input into the ongoing processes of incremental design change becomes most apparent. Most women attend the kind of ceremonies at which *aṣọ òkè* is worn on an extremely frequent basis. Particularly in the months around Christmas many people will be invited to one or more weddings or engagements each week. They are therefore keenly aware of what cloth is being selected by others for their own events. Especially among the wealthier elites of Lagos and *Ìbàdàn* awareness of the latest trends spreads rapidly. Of course women who anticipate that they will themselves be ordering some cloth soon pay even closer attention to new developments than usual.

When she visits the dealer or dealers she is considering using, the woman may already have in mind a cloth that she saw recently and admired. She will look through the extensive stock for something similar, or for other designs that attract her attention. Since the cloth is sold in bundles of strips she will need to use a degree of imagination to visualize what the effect will be once the strips are sewn up. Some women will see something they admire in the dealer's stock and simply order that. The danger of using an existing design like this however, particularly if the planned ceremony is some way off, is that one then risks seeing the same cloth used first by another family within the same social network. Particularly for prominent families this would be a cause of considerable comment and embarrassment for the woman concerned and be seen as tarnishing the overall success of the ceremony. One can try to secure a promise from the dealer not to show the sample to any other customers, which may be possible depending on the importance of the order and the relationship between dealer and customer, but there is no way of knowing whether one or more other dealers may not have the same design. Many people therefore

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prefer to use an existing design they like as the basis for proposing some minor modification, such as adjusting the colour combination, adding or subtracting or otherwise modifying part of the design such as the number of warp stripes, or combining features of two existing designs. As with the traders themselves the extent to which an individual customer makes an input is a matter of personal inclination. Some may have or develop a clear idea of what they want, others will be guided by the traders advice. For most, the aim is to end up with a *aşo òkè* that is clearly recognizable both as part of the latest fashion and as in some way distinctively novel. Of course the customers idea of what the latest fashion is may be different depending on where she lives and the extent to which she is familiar with recent developments. Some people however are content simply to buy a popular design that appears new to them without worrying whether others will be using it.

The woman buying the cloth may take a small sample piece of an existing design away from the trader to show to her son or daughter, friends and relatives, providing an opportunity for others to have a degree of input into the cloth design and selection process. Once a final decision has been made, the customer will attempt to assess how many women and men are likely to agree to buy the *aşo ebi* before placing an order with the dealer. The aim is to have and to demonstrate via the *aşo ebi* that you have, as large a group as possible of relatives and close friends who are sufficiently committed to the occasion to express their support by "taking" the cloth. Usually she will canvass among people she is not sure of and try to obtain a firm commitment from them in advance. It is important to be able to judge the numbers reasonably accurately. On the one hand she will usually have to place a substantial deposit with the cloth trader to secure the order, resulting in an embarrassing and possibly costly dispute if she later finds she needs substantially less cloth. On the other hand if the numbers are underestimated it

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may not be possible at the last minute to obtain additional cloth, which may mean some guests who wanted the *aşo ɛbi* either have to wear a slightly different design or go without altogether. This happened at one engagement party I attended, where a mistake about numbers lead to two different cloths being worn as *aşo ɛbi* by members of the bride's side, attracting a number of adverse comments.

Once the cloth has been woven, it is distributed to the participants a week or so before the ceremony, leaving them to make their own arrangements to have it sewn into the appropriate garments by their individual tailors. Each person taking the *aşo ɛbi* is normally expected to pay for their cloth, and it is tacitly expected that the woman organizing it will add a mark up, which is generally of the order of N500 to N1000 per set. This too has to be finely judged since there will be adverse comments if it becomes obvious that someone is charging too much. I was also told by women who were experienced in this role that it was advisable always to try to collect the money before handing out the cloth, as it was frequently extremely difficult to recover it subsequently.

Although the pattern of the cloth is the same, and the garments into which it is sewn are rather standardized, there is no requirement for all the participants in the *aşo ɛbi* to look identical. Despite the ideology of inclusiveness and equality associated with the custom, there is still plenty of scope for differentials in wealth and status to be visually expressed in practice. We have already seen how the practice introduced in the 1980s of producing the same design in both a cotton and a more expensive silk version allows a marking of differences in wealth within a group of celebrants. I was even told of one woman organizing the *aşo ɛbi* for a group of her fellow employees to mark a work related occasion who issued all of them with cotton cloth but turned up on the day wearing a silk version herself<sup>45</sup>. Beyond this however the

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lace and accessories which are worn with the *aşo òkè* provide a means for conspicuous displays of affluence. Fashionable women are keenly aware of the relative prices of the latest styles of imported cloth, and a new and expensive example will often be commented on. As with *aşo ebi*, attitudes to extravagant displays of extremely expensive cloth are ambivalent, with criticism of wasteful expenditure mingling with general admiration for a new style. Both the criticism and the extravagance reached a peak during the oil boom years of the early 1970s when Wole Soyinka satirized the fashion for lace in his play "Opera Wonyosi". An article in the Nigerian Tribune (5/7/1971) recorded an incident that only temporarily damaged the popularity of the fabric. One of the first batch of armed robbers to face public execution in 1971 was shot wearing "a suit of the most expensive lace material." The writer commented "Before Folorunso's execution there was a frenzy craze for lace, and the material was selling at as high a price as £15 per yard. Because armed robber Folorunso faced the firing squad in a lace suit the general public developed a sudden aversion to lace. A lady in lace was called Folorunso's wife." Although we have already noted (page 260 above) that since the mid-1980s the continuing economic crisis has cut demand for lace at all income levels, it remains an important feature of both male and female dress on ceremonial occasions, and there are still a significant number of customers able to afford the most costly materials. Indeed not least among the perceived advantages of *aşo òkè* itself is that a well selected cloth can be as fashionable as the most expensive lace. As one cloth trader explained<sup>48</sup>: "the bride and groom, they won't want people to dress more than them. If they go and put N8000 satin lace, they see N65,000 they don't like it. Seeing somebody with N65,000 [lace]. But when you put on some nice *aşo òkè* it is more valuable than the money, it looks more." By wearing "completes" of *aşo òkè* the main celebrants avoid the risk of being

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overshadowed at their own ceremony by someone wearing a visible more costly style of lace.

In general then, when *aşo òkè* is being purchased, the primary concern of the buyers is to select a cloth which appeals to them and which will be recognized and admired as both fashionable and, ideally, distinctive. The particular design of the cloth is important only in so far as it fulfills these aspirations, and has no particular communicative import beyond this. Wearing a cloth with green warp stripes, or openwork, for example, conveys no particular information beyond that evoked by whatever happens to be the relationship between these features and contemporary fashion. There is a partial exception to this however, which returns us to the three particularly prestigious cloths, *sányán*, *ètù*, and *àlàárí*. For certain occasions where people want to stress both their respect for the event and their awareness of participating in a tradition, they may choose to do so by selecting an acknowledged “big cloth”, *aşo nla*, that marks the occasion as a particularly important celebration. The sons and daughters of an elderly person may wear *sányán* or *ètù* to the funeral with this effect, while the cloths are also popular for chieftaincy title taking ceremonies. Modern cotton versions of *sányán* and *ètù* are produced in quite large quantities to meet this demand, and it is still possible to have the cloths woven from wild silk or hand-spun cotton if this is required. Less commonly, one also sees modern reproductions of other old designs such as ikats and *àlàárí*. As we saw in the introduction rather than wearing *sányán* as such, many people choose to select designs that allude to it, by utilizing beige cotton in modern patterns in combination with lurex, thus drawing together both fashion and the desired reference to the prestige associated with past practice. This limited set of cloths then, by visibly referring to certain past styles that retain their earlier distinction, is able to

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carry an additional communicative import, beyond that of the regular flow of novel designs that characterizes contemporary *aşo òkè*.

We have looked at the use of cloth at ceremonies so far from the perspective of the organizers and celebrants, but there is of course another side to the consumption of *aşo òkè* at these events, namely the perspective of those women who are invited to purchase the fabric as *aşo ẹbi*. Contrary to the stereotyped image of unthinking accumulation of new cloths promulgated by the male participants in the critique of *aşo ẹbi* cited above, most women do face a real dilemma over the regular demands from friends and relatives to participate in *aşo ẹbi*. Even the cheapest *aşo òkè* will cost around N1500 for a shawl and headtie by the time the organizer has added her cut, and the cost can rise as high as N5000 or more for fashionable styles. A woman who has a normal circle of friends and extended family can be invited to take *aşo ẹbi* as often as once a week at busy periods of the year. Salaries, for the minority of women who are fortunate enough to have salaried employment, are rarely as high as N1000 per week, whilst most women rely on the irregular income of small-scale trading. For all apart from a small affluent elite, then, it is clearly impossible to accept all the cloth one is invited to buy. Yet if someone hardly ever buys *aşo ẹbi* from her friends, she is not likely to be able to muster much enthusiasm when it is her turn to stage a ceremony. This may not be too serious a problem for older people who have already established a certain level of respect and social status, but it can become a real concern to younger women who have yet to stage their own engagement and wedding. Careful judgment is needed to distribute a limited number of acceptances in the most socially advantageous way and to minimize any offense caused by the inevitable refusals to participate. Men, who are normally expected to spend only N100 or so on the single strip of cloth necessary to tailor a cap largely avoid these problems.

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Women attending an event where they either chose not to take the *aşo ebi*, or were not sufficiently close to the celebrants to be invited to do so, will often try to wear another *aşo òkè* they already own that is similar in colour to the *aşo ebi* of the day. Failing that they can wear any other *aşo òkè* from their wardrobe - usually this will be a recently bought one, but one sometimes sees older women wearing quite old cloths. The same range of events for which new *aşo òkè* is purchased by the main celebrants are then also the major occasions on which people reuse the cloth that they already own. Men may also choose to wear a complete robe and trousers of *aşo òkè* to these events although most men own only one of these outfits, which they purchased for their own wedding, or for that of one of their children.

There is also a wide range of lesser celebrations that many people may wish to mark by wearing *aşo òkè*, but for which they will not normally purchase a new set. Among these are church services. Some women can be seen wearing *aşo òkè* at most Sunday services, but on special days such as at Christmas, Easter, or Mother's Day the number will be far larger. Other events would include birthday parties, school graduation days, and even formal visits to friends and relatives. There are therefore a considerable number of opportunities for women to reuse their *aşo òkè* in the months and years following the occasion for which it was commissioned. This is even more true for men, since caps can be used as part of their everyday attire. Over time, cloths may be demoted from their initial special status to a variety of more and more mundane functions, used as a wrapper against the cold of the Harmattan by women at the market, as a cover cloth at night, as a floor cover for a baby to play on, until eventually they wear thin and are discarded.

There is a widely held opinion that *aşo òkè* and any other cloths that were acquired for important occasions, should be kept in good condition and passed on within the family. Since they are bought for all the major life-cycle



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occasions, a complete set of all the *aṣọ òkè* a man or woman had used during her life, would serve as a visual record of all the important events for the family and their close friends, complementing the numerous photographs that are now ubiquitous in Yorùbá households. Like the specially commissioned wax-resist and velvet fabrics some wealthy families used to mark important events, *aṣọ òkè* can serve as a “commemorative” cloth (Akinwumi 1990).

The extent to which this ideal is realized in practice however varies considerably. Although I did find a few individuals who still owned large quantities of *aṣọ òkè* inherited from their parents and could identify the events as far back as the 1930s for which the cloths were commissioned, this was very unusual. More commonly people might retain one or two of their mother's or father's cloths without knowing what it was bought for, together with one or two old cloths of their own, most often from their wedding. Mostly though, they simply did not have enough clothes to keep a chest full of cloths without using them. An overriding regard for the mnemonic qualities of cloth is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford. There is however one aspect of the use of old cloths that is still widely observed. When a young women has her first baby it is expected that her mother will give her the cloth she will use as a baby-tie to secure the infant to her back. Elisha Renne (1995:192-196) has recently provided us with a sensitive and nuanced account of the cultural salience of the practice of using cloth to “back” a child, drawing on ideas which extend far more widely than the Bùnú region that was her primary focus. The imagery of “backing” as protecting and sustaining is frequently invoked, as for example in the case of a major *Ìséyìn* master weaver<sup>49</sup> who, when talking about the numerous less succesful weavers who were reliant on him, told me “masters carry masters on their backs nowadays.” The role of cloth in linking together generations through the female line is actualized in the practice of women giving to their daughters some of their old *aṣọ òkè*, often

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that obtained for their own wedding, to literally support the new born child. The overwhelming majority of *aṣọ òkè* that one sees today in non-ceremonial contexts, for example, worn by women in the market, will be these older cloths in use in this way. Expensive velvet cloths or hand-woven babyties from *Ìjèbu* or *Okene* may also be given to a new mother for the same purpose.

We began this chapter by looking at a number of local discourses that elucidate aspects of the wearing of *aṣọ òkè*. Now that we have explored the ways in which *aṣọ òkè* is actually worn in the 1990s we will conclude it by considering briefly three further discourses that have a rather more problematic relation to local dress practice, namely those of aesthetics, of ethnicity, and of fashion.

### **Aesthetics and the Evaluation of Cloth:**

Although there is a sense in which the whole of this chapter, dealing as it does with the selection of cloth and the debates and decisions that surround these choices, may be regarded as dealing with aesthetics, we must also consider the relevance of a narrower, more formal approach to issues of indigenous aesthetics. There is a large and growing body of literature on the subject of “Yorùbá aesthetics.” Robert Farris Thompson (1971, 1973) has synthesized comments made during the visual evaluation of certain types of Yorùbá sculpture as the basis to postulate a series of supposedly pan-Yorùbá aesthetic criteria, an approach criticized by Hallen (1979) and Cole (1982:176.) Margaret and Henry Drewal (1987, Drewal, H.J. 1988) have, without making clear their methodology, postulated a theory of “seriate” composition as the basis of Yorùbá visual and verbal aesthetics. A number of Yorùbá art historians, lead by Rowland Abiodun and Babatunde Lawal, have

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elaborated a number of concepts they argue are central to a Yorùbá aesthetics drawn primarily from a study of oral literature and in particular the texts of the Ifá divination system (Lawal 1974, Abiodun 1990, Yai 1994). Although this is not the place for a detailed critique of this literature we can note that a basic ambiguity underlies all three approaches and gives rise to a number of their methodological limitations. What is never made clear is whether the writers believe that they have located a fixed set of concepts about aesthetics in art and life shared by all peoples now regarding themselves as Yorùbá and made manifest in their visual and verbal arts, although perhaps verbalized more articulately by certain specialists, or whether they have merely identified a vocabulary for aesthetic discourse. All three provide new, interesting, and often informative ways of describing aspects of the art, but only Abiodun moves beyond description to posit locally-held abstract criteria of assessment, such as the display of *ojú-onà*, which he translates as “design consciousness” (1990:76). However, although Abiodun succeeds in demonstrating that such abstract concepts can be articulated in Yorùbá (Omari 1990:120), a reluctance to rely on field informants means neither he nor any of his colleagues have yet demonstrated that any of these concepts are in fact used either in the Ifá texts or in artistic discourse beyond the confines of academia.

Turning from these rather abstract concerns to the question of what people actually do say about cloth, it is necessary to distinguish an aesthetic response, or an awareness of aesthetic properties, from what Morphy calls aesthetics in the strictest sense of the term: “a body of theory about art which is reflexive and concerned with the theory of response to works of art and with art critical practice” (Morphy 1992:182). Whether or not such a theory existed prior to the work of Abiodun and his colleagues, it is not generally verbalized in the assessment of cloth. We can note three contexts in particular where an awareness of the aesthetic properties is apparent and verbalized assessments

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and comments would seem likely to be made: in the course of preparing and weaving new designs; when a trader or customer is selecting which design to buy; and when onlookers are responding to the wearing of a cloth.

Although it is possible that some weavers could be persuaded to rank a set of cloth samples and discuss the reasons for their choices, in the manner of the experiments Thompson (1973), Cole (1982), Vogel (1979), and others have made with sculptures, it was not felt that this would be useful since I was interested in learning whether such issues were raised in the normal course of their day to day activities. That weavers possess an aesthetic awareness that is more or less finely tuned to the design parameters of prevailing tastes in *aşo òkè* is manifest in the formation of new patterns, which as we have seen is an important aspect of the responsibilities of a master weaver. It also seems clear to an observer that some master weavers are better at this than others, but although an ability to produce successful new designs is likely to be a factor in promoting the overall business success of a prosperous master weaver it is not one that is singled out for comment, which will focus instead on his wealth and its visible trappings. Nor, in the time I spent with weavers in *Ọyọ* and elsewhere did I hear younger weavers discussing the design of cloths, or making comparisons between cloth designs. Weavers tend to take a rather prosaic attitude to their cloth, regarding all designs that they can sell equally, and their personal likes or dislikes, in so far as they think about them at all are not considered relevant. It is also likely that the hierarchical structure of weaving groups inhibits any public discussion of design preferences, since all new designs are associated with the master weaver and his customers. The master weaver or other senior workers freely comment on or criticize the technical aspects of the weaving of their juniors, drawing attention to any mistakes, but junior weavers do not attempt to form new designs.

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When we turn from weavers to traders and consumers who are considering the selection of a cloth or commenting on a cloth worn by another, there is a degree of verbal evaluation which we might regard as, in part, a verbalization of aesthetic responses. We have seen (page 246 above) that there is a specialized vocabulary for the assessment of the technical merits of a cloth, referring to the tightness and neatness of the weaving etc., but while these factors do of course contribute to the overall aesthetic response to the form of the cloth, there is no comparable vocabulary for discussing such features as the design layout, specific features within it, the brightness or dullness of the effect, or other aspects we might feel could be picked out by a verbalized aesthetic evaluation. Instead the comments are likely to be of a more general nature and directed towards the visual impact of the whole cloth, along the lines of remarks such as, "I like this one", "this one attracts me more than that one," "this is fine", or more rarely, "this is too much." English words such as "like" and "fine", meaning beautiful, are in common usage<sup>50</sup>. Similarly, in praising a fine cloth that someone is wearing, whether in casual remarks or in the course of a more formulaic expression of praises, the remarks are likely to be directed to the whole cloth, drawing attention to its expense, to the fact that it is a "big" cloth, rather than singling out a particularly admirable design feature<sup>51</sup>.

Two probable reasons, one of general, and the other of local, application can be suggested for these somewhat disappointing conclusions. Firstly, as has often been pointed out (Cole 1982:176) nuanced and discriminating aesthetic evaluation is rarely a feature of everyday discourse in most societies. More interestingly, we have been suggesting in the course of this chapter that while *aşo òkè* design is important, this importance is manifested in an unusual way, by a focus more on the novelty or otherwise of a design than on the specific features of the design itself. It is enough to say that

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one likes some cloth because it is new without going into the kind of details about precisely how it is so that might have lead to the development of a more specialized vocabulary of aesthetic responses.

### **Aṣọ Òkè and Ethnic Identity:**

Is aṣọ òkè a form of ethnic dress, of “the body modifications and supplements that mark the ethnic identity of an individual” as defined by Joanne Eicher (1995:1) ? As we have seen the emergence of aṣọ òkè as a distinct phenomenon, albeit one with roots in older traditions of narrow strip textile weaving and older ideas about cloth and dress, is a phenomenon of the period since the mid-nineteenth century. Over much the same period missionaries, colonial officials, scholars, politicians, artists, and many others have been engaged in the ongoing process J.D.Y. Peel has called the “cultural work of Yorùbá ethnogenesis” (1989). What is the relationship between aṣọ òkè and a developing sense of Yorùbá identity ? Wolff and Wahab (1995:11) have argued that certain types of aṣọ òkè, notably *sányán*, *ẹtù*, and *àlàárí*, are worn when “individuals want to express their ‘Yorubanness’ ” but, leaving aside the vexed question of what such a term might mean, on what occasions do people feel the need for such an expression ? Moreover, what are we to make of the wearing of the same cloth by a diverse range of other, non-Yorùbá peoples, within Nigeria as well as in export markets such as Ghana and Sierra Leone ?

We have seen that dress was one of the key areas of dispute in the movement of cultural nationalism in late nineteenth century Lagos that scholars have come to regard as a crucial early chapter in the narrative of a modern sense of Yorùbá ethnicity, a process in which the idea of a new Yorùbá ‘nation’ was “built selectively and creatively on a range of different

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preexisting elements” (Law 1996:69). In his recent critique of linguistic analogies in the theory of clothing consumption Colin Campbell (1996) has questioned the extent to which most clothing selection involves a free choice between alternatives and argued for a distinction between behavior and action - “it is really only the second that is ‘meaningful’ in the sense of manifesting consciously formulated intentions” (1996:95).

Whilst it is clear that a very real choice did exist, and to an extent still does, for Yorùbá-speakers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, of whether to dress in European-style clothing or to retain clothing forms of more-or-less indigenous origin, it is less apparent whether the intentions made manifest in such a choice had much to do with being Yorùbá. Even among the minority of the literate elite who participated in the debate we discussed above, the idea that it was a specifically “Yorùbá” way of dressing they were advocating, as opposed to a “native” or an “African” way, was rarely expressed. In the Rev. S. C. Phillips 1913 play “Aṣọ Ilẹ-wa or Native Dress”, it is one of the Christians, Johnson, dressed “in frock coat and silk hat”, who points out to his *agbádá*-wearing opponents that their own attire has Fulani Moslem origins and replaced the earlier custom of tying and wrapping cloth. Even as late as the 1930s advocates<sup>52</sup> of a reversion to local styles referred to their supposed health advantages, their greater beauty and dignity, to the fact that they did not imitate the Europeans, and that they expressed solidarity with the general population, rather than appealing to a timeless Yorùbá traditionality. In any event, for the majority of the population, the issue was not the all or nothing choice that confronted the rare individuals such as David Brown Vincent, to change their clothing and their name and effectively renounce an earlier identity.

For both the minority of mission-educated European dress-wearing

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Saro elite, and for the mass of the “native dress” wearing population there was rather a range of occasionally reoccurring choices, standing out from the habitual, the limited budgets, restricted information, etc., that constrained their daily dress behavior. The choices made variously reflected widely shared ideas about dress and personal prestige, religious affiliation, access to education and employment, regional traditions of textile production and use, the availability and expense of imported cloth and clothing, fashion, and ideas about the occasion for which the attire was required. There is little reason to believe that a desire to make some kind of statement about Yorùbá identity was a prominent motivator of dress selection. Out of this interaction of habit, choice, and a variety of both old and new ideas about dress use emerged an eclectic and still evolving mix of both local and imported forms of attire, notable among which has been the patterns of *aṣọ òkè* consumption we have described in this chapter.



Figure 60: A popular theatre performance in the 1970s - the Duro Ladipo Theatre production of “Oluwari”. Note the prominent use of *aṣọ òkè* outfits. Photograph courtesy *Nigeria Magazine*.



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It is perhaps more productive to think of the weaving and wearing of *aṣọ òkè* as something that Yorùbá people now do, as an aspect of their habitual behavior, than as something that is intended to make any kind of statement about collective identity. As we have seen, both the production and consumption of hand-woven cloth embody both real continuities with and important breaks from the past. It is this whole package of social practice surrounding the cloth that is connoted by the term *aṣọ òkè*, embracing the complex interactions of material artifacts, ideas, memories, habits, choices, and fashions that constitutes the tradition. Depending on the context people may choose to emphasize the continuities or stress the changes. There is certainly a sense that whatever the modifications that have occurred over the years, there are important ways in which by dressing in *aṣọ òkè* people are behaving as their fathers and mothers did before them. This sense of adherence to the ways of the past is frequently reinforced by one of the most important mediators of ideas about the past in Yorùbá society over the past half century, namely the popular traveling theatres and their successors utilizing film, television and video. Many of the founders of these theatrical troupes such as Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, and Kola Ogunmola went to the lengths of recruiting performers from the ranks masquerading and drumming lineages in a conscious attempt to draw on a Yorùbá cultural heritage (Ogundeji 1997, Jeyifo1984.) Elaborately embroidered *aṣọ òkè agbádá* and full sets of women's wrapper cloths were prominent in the costumes worn for virtually all of their plays, helping to promulgate an idealized image of dress traditions (see photo on previous page.) Although the depiction of Yorùbá religious practice in the films and videos of many of their successors would appear to be inspired as much by Indian cinematic fantasies as local research, these widely watched productions continue to perpetuate a particular image of the past in general and of "traditional dress" in particular which is increasingly influential.

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Accompanying this awareness of aspects of dress practice that allude to the past, there is also a knowledge that other people, who are not Yorùbá, manage these things differently, and, to a greater or lesser extent, have their own traditions. However, it is my impression that differences in dress are not among the aspects of perceived ethnic differences that are normally regarded as of great significance, that although people note that Igbo and Hausa do at times dress differently from Yorùbá, this is not a topic that is normally commented on<sup>53</sup>. Only at the height of the Igbo/Yorùbá political rivalry at the end of the 1940s was I able to find one such allusion in the press, when in the context of a bitter polemic by leaders of the Yorùbá cultural society, the Ègbé Òmọ Odùduwà, it was claimed that “the Ibos had no national costume and had to borrow the Yoruba mode of dress” (*The Daily Service* 25/6/1948.) Yet at much the same time a prominent member of the society, Sir Adeyemo Alakija, the chairman of the Lagos branch, was quoted condemning *aşo ẹbi* (*The Daily Service* 22/1/1948), a custom that was by then a widespread feature of the Yorùbá way of using their local cloth.

More commonly, leading politicians in the period leading up to and beyond Independence in 1960, whilst they were certainly conscious of the symbolic significance of local as opposed to European dress (a theme that returned with the call for a boycott of European goods), appear to have selected their robes without regard to any specific ethnic origin. Thus Azikiwe, then President of the Senate, was pictured in the Nigerian Delegation leaving for London for the final transfer negotiations in May 1960 wearing a robe embroidered in Hausa style but made from ikat-dyed *aşo òkè* (*Daily Times* 5/5/1960), while the northern leader and first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was often photographed wearing *aşo òkè*.

Indeed, in the spirit of an era when pan-Africanist sentiment

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was at its peak, Nigerian politicians often followed the inspiration of Kwame Nkrumah in wearing Ghanaian 'kente' cloth - the *Daily Times* of 23/5/1961 carried a front-page photograph of the Eastern Region Premier, Okpara, presenting one such cloth to Dr Azikiwe. More significant for Yorùbá ideas about the continued salience of *aṣọ òkè* however, was the boost given to the long-standing association of "big" robes and cloths with powerful men and women. Yorùbá politicians, too, drew on and reproduced this conventional marker of status, with political leaders such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo regularly wearing *aṣọ òkè*. As dress for politicians *aṣọ òkè* was incorporated into a developing pan-Nigerian mode of "big man's" attire, rather than becoming another signifier of ethnic difference. It could of course be combined with other more locally specific attire, such as distinctive headgear, or in the case of Chief Awolowo in the photograph, an Ìjèbu Yorùbá shawl associated with chieftaincy<sup>54</sup>.



Figure 61: The late Chief Obafemi Awolowo (left), photographed just prior to Independence, with the Oba of Benin and the colonial Governor. Photo courtesy Ministry of Information, Ibadàn, Photographer unknown.

Although we have suggested that when Yorùbá people put on *aṣọ òkè* they are generally aware of participating in an ongoing tradition, it would be a mistake to infer from this that they are intending to make some kind of "statement" about that tradition. Rather they are simply participating in and

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reproducing it. Certain cloths however, do stand out, as we have seen, from the processes of incremental and innovative change that characterize *aşo òkè* more generally. Selecting these cloths, *sányán*, *ètù*, or *àlàárí*, does for most people today represent a consciously formulated choice that communicates certain intentions. They show, as we saw in the first chapter, that the wearer has sufficient knowledge of Yorùbá cultural history to select a cloth that is believed to have a long-standing association both with high status and with celebrating a really important occasion, or in other words that he or she has an informed knowledge of the tradition. It is this that makes the cloths particularly appropriate for events such as chieftaincy title ceremonies. Whilst there is a sense in which restating a key tradition may be seen as reinforcing a feeling of ethnic self-identity and thus contributing to the cultural construction of the Yorùbá, it is primarily through demonstrating knowledge of culturally appropriate behavior rather than communicating ethnic identity as such.

While I would suggest that the wearing of *aşo òkè* is more directly concerned with the various internal dynamics of tradition, status, fashion, etc., within the various communities of Yorùbá-speaking peoples, than a means of delineating ethnic boundaries, there are of course occasions where the different dress traditions of the diverse peoples of Nigeria are brought together. Aside from events such as state cultural fairs and displays, the most notable of these is at inter-ethnic marriages. At one such wedding I attended in Lagos in June 1995 for example, the groom was Yorùbá and the bride Kalabari. Family and guests on the groom's side wore a variety of *aşo òkè* as *aşo èbí*, while the bride's side wore checked Madras cloth wrappers, and in the case of the senior men, the distinctive long white shirts and bowler hats of Kalabari elders. Even here however, dress is not an unfailing guide to ethnic identity, since it was possible to find Igbo and Yorùbá women among the bride's friends who had

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adopted the Kalabari style for the occasion, while on the groom's guests side were numerous non-Yorùbá wearing *aşo òkè*.

*Aşo òkè*, as we have seen, has long been exported well beyond the Yorùbá region and has been used as a prestige textile in a variety of local contexts as far afield as Sierra Leone. More recently however, with Nigeria itself, the whole package of behavior associated with the cloth that we have seen has come to characterize the use of *aşo òkè* among the Yorùbá in the twentieth century, involving aspects such as *aşo ebi*, has become quite widely popular among the wealthy members of non-Yorùbá ethnic groups. This is particularly the case with people living in the still predominantly Yorùbá metropolis of Lagos, but also applies elsewhere in cities such as Kano, Port Harcourt, and Enugu. Fashion, rather than ethnicity, is the dominant discourse, with ideas about the ethnic origin of the cloth irrelevant. Perhaps the most remarkable illustration of this is the wearing of *aşo òkè* at a highly contested ceremony that was recently held as part of a jostling for leadership in the ongoing process of constructing Igbo ethnicity. In May 1996 a prominent Igbo politician, Chief Odumegwu-Ojukwu, arranged to have himself crowned with the title Eze-Igbo (glossed as King of the Igbo) in a ceremony at the historically important Igbo town of Nri. Prominent beside him on the cover of the programme of events his wife wears the latest style of "Super Q" *aşo òkè*.

As this last example makes clear, ethnicity is not a particularly helpful concept in elucidating the contemporary use of *aşo òkè*. As well as being a highly complex and elusive concept in academic discourse (Fardon 1987), it is rarely a feature of the way Yorùbá people talk about or write about dress. Although in other contexts, elsewhere within Nigeria such as in the Niger delta (Sumberg 1995), and even within groups of peoples such as the Bùnú (Renne 1995) speaking Yorùbá-related languages, aspects of dress may be key signifiers of ethnic differentiation, the position with *aşo òkè* is more complex.

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Figure 62: Cover of programme produced to mark the contested installation of Chief Odumegwu-Ojukwu as Eze Igbo, May 1996. Note the use of "Super-Q" style *aşo òkè* by his wife. Photograph scanned from The Guardian (Lagos), 11 May 1996.

On the one hand it is seen locally as a distinctively Yorùbá tradition, despite the fact that the cloth is widely worn elsewhere. On the other, differences in dress, though recognized, are not among the primary referents for a sense of Yorùbá identity and difference vis-a-vis other Nigerian peoples.

### **Fashion, Fashion Leaders, and Fashion Designers:**

If the language of ethnic difference is a discourse which is often assumed to apply to forms of dress in Africa but has little explanatory value in

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the case of *aşo òkè*, the reverse is true of the language of fashion. Although writers on fashion generally assert that it is a distinctive phenomenon of modern Western industrial societies, I shall suggest that despite major differences, there are many aspects of the consumption patterns of *aşo òkè* that conform quite closely to the classic model of imitation and distinction as the motors of fashion change. The parallels are however not exact - while there are fashions, fashion leaders, and fashion designers, the role of the latter is somewhat marginal, and as we have seen, the responsibility for design change is dispersed among all the participants, from master weavers, through cloth traders, to consumers.

For the pioneer theorists of fashion, such as Simmel (1904) and Bell (1947), fashion marked a change in consumer behavior, a move beyond the satisfaction of actual needs, which they saw as a distinctive feature of Western modernity to be contrasted with the static traditionality of non-Western others. Despite some minor acknowledgment of dress changes in other cultures, this supposedly fundamental distinction has been largely retained by more recent approaches (Calefato 1997:70, Lipovetsky 1994:35). According to Lipovetsky, for example, in other cultures change is constrained by "an intangible repertory fixed by tradition" in which "there was no formal innovation." Accepting Craik's proposal (1994:18) that there are in fact fashion-like changes in various cultures, Gronow simply reframes the categorical distinction to preserve the supposed advances of the "West": "in earlier times and other cultures - despite the fact that one certainly can identify changes and even novelties in dress and decorum which deviate from the standard costume and which resemble our fashion mechanism - these changes are deviations from a pattern and do not form a pattern of their own as is the case with the modern Western fashion pattern" (1997:76). While it might be tempting to dismiss these arguments as reflecting an ignorance of "other cultures" the



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opposition reoccurs in a slightly different form in a context where this charge could certainly not be made. Concerned to explore and celebrate the various roles of cloth worldwide, Weiner and Schneider (1989:16) make a similar contrast but reverse the implicit valuation in favour of the Other:

“Characterized by perpetual mutations, rapid obsolescence, and high-velocity turnover, fashion is propelled through the interaction of designers or ‘tastemakers’ and the changing wants of consumers. Not so the cloth that in small-scale societies binds brides to grooms, the living to the dead, ancestors to heirs, the past to the present and the future.”

In fact the supposed difference is more about changes in perceptions of Self and Other in European discourse than changes in dress in non-European cultures. Reviewing the history of European perceptions of dress and dress change in China, Dorothy Ko has recently demonstrated that the contrast emerged in European writing about China only in the nineteenth century when: “the identification of European fashion with change needed an other to assume the mantle of “costume.” The fashion - “costume” divide separated the Europeans from the Chinese not only visually, but by placing them on disparate locations on a linear time-line” (1997:7). Clearly the concept of fashion will not be applicable to all societies, but by moving beyond this absolute distinction we can both avoid imposing another version of the distancing temporal contrast Fabian (1983) has shown to pervade discussions of other cultures and recognize a useful way of thinking about aspects of dress change in a surprising variety of contexts<sup>55</sup>.

The classic model of fashion change in summary postulates that an alternation of distinction and emulation provides the motor for change. Designers in tune with the zeitgeist propose a range of mostly rather minor modifications to existing dress forms, from which some become widely propagated by the activities of a small number of fashion leaders. As the dress



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of these fashionable individuals becomes widely emulated, it rapidly loses its cachet, and in search of renewed distinction further apparent novelties are introduced. "In fashion the desire for novelty is satisfied over and over again, despite - or because of, the fact that fashion only repeats and varies old styles and models" (Gronow 1997:78). Gronow notes (1997:94) that although Simmel studied the movement of fashion down a class hierarchy, he did not see its form, the simultaneous processes of social identification and differentiation, as requiring a class system.

That this model has a number of close parallels with the relation between design change and the consumption of *aşo òkè* should already be apparent. Numerous mostly minor modifications to the existing cloth designs emerge continuously. Certain of these novel designs, or variations of them, become increasingly popular and are widely imitated, while the focus of change moves on in the search for new means of distinction. Although, as we have seen this does at times involve major innovations, there is also a substantial amount of repetition and variation of old styles and models. Thus, for example, the vogue for wide strips with closely spaced rows of openwork that became popular in mid-1996, combined the new wider strips with a return to the long-established openwork technique. Moreover, there are a number of wealthy individuals who play the role of fashion leaders in this process of distinction and emulation. Certain Lagos women who have prominent roles in elite society are known for establishing new fashions, both in *aşo òkè* and in imported attire. These women become sartorial role models, often photographed for the Lagos newspapers and weekly gossip magazines, whose styles are widely copied. As well as the influences exerted on others by their attire at numerous social events the mechanism of *aşo èbí* provides a means by which their cloth choices are regularly distributed to large numbers of participants in their ceremonies. Although a reputation for being fashionable

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can be transitory, these ladies work hard to maintain their social position through conspicuous displays of wealth and taste. One such woman has even crowned her success by being singled out for recognition by the Oba of Lagos, who a few years ago awarded the title of *Ìyá Oge*, "Mother of Fashion" to Chief (Mrs) Opral Benson<sup>56</sup>.

As in Europe the concept of fashion is somewhat ambivalent. Although fashionable people are admired and praised, the attitude of men towards womens' fashions can be distinctly mixed. The same newspapers that have womens' pages advising their readers on fashionable attire print regular articles written by men on themes such as "the ugly and immoral way in which our present day girls and women dress" (*Nigerian Tribune* 20/9/1971). Much of this criticism is however directed at female students rather than more socially established figures. This ambiguity is reflected in the Yorùbá terminology for fashion. Of the three common ways in which one can describe someone as fashionable in the Yorùbá language, two can also carry the negative association of ostentation and showing off. The word *oge*, as used in the phrase, "*ó ní ẹ̀ se oge*", can mean either "he or she is fashionable," or "he or she is showing off." Abraham (1958:454) notes that "*ó ẹ̀ se mi lóge*" means "she dressed me smartly", but "*ológe*" means "dandy." Similarly "*ó ní gbọ́ fáàrí*" means "he or she knows fashion", but "*ó ní ẹ̀ se fáàrí*" means "he or she is joking", while Abraham (1958:205) gives "ostentation: showing off for *fáàrí* also. The third terminology is interesting for a different reason, because it captures the temporal significance of fashion - a fashionable woman could be described as "*obínrin àsìkò*", which literally means "woman of time."

While the alternation of distinction and emulation closely parallels the fashion model the role of designers is rather different. Although there are numerous fashion designers in Lagos in particular, and even a national association of designers, they are somewhat marginal figures as far as design

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change and the consumption of *aşo òkè* are concerned. In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the availability of affordable ready-to-wear clothing, apart from second-hand clothes imported from the USA, is limited. Most people rely on buying cloth by the yard and taking it to be sewn up into a garment by a tailor or seamstress. In the period since the 1950s, when a few of the more affluent women involved in the seamstress trade were able to take courses in dressmaking and design in Europe, it has become the norm for most of the women who sew dresses and train female apprentices to style themselves as “fashion design institutes” (Denzler 1995:31). These can range in size from one woman and her sewing machine to a few establishments with thirty or more apprentices at a time. At the top end of the scale there are a number of women with boutiques in expensive districts of Lagos who do operate as designers mediating international fashions to a local clientele. A few of them have also had some success in exporting to the African-American market. In attempting to impart an “African” look to their garments some of these designers have drawn on local fabrics, including both *àdìrẹ* and *aşo òkè*. *Aşo òkè* has been tailored into garments such as dresses, jackets, and womens’ suits. However, as yet none of these women have received the degree of recognition, either locally or internationally, achieved by some of their counterparts, such as Chris Seydou or Xuly Bët, in Francophone Africa. Although local designers are patronized on occasions by fashionable Nigerian women, there is a marked preference among those who can afford it for shopping in London or New York. As yet, tailored *aşo òkè* is rarely seen and is regarded more as a curiosity than a fashion inspiration. Their use of *aşo òkè* has been very much secondary to its main market as ceremonial dress and has had no discernible impact on design change in the cloth itself.

Despite this difference, however, a familiar type of fashion mechanism, in which design changes stimulated and promoted by a minority

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among the wealthy elite are gradually diffused among the wider market of dress consumers, only to be displaced in turn by a regular succession of further changes, is a characteristic and locally recognized feature of *aşo òkè* consumption. The focus of these fashions over recent years has been on particular new colours, such as orange, turquoise, fuchsia, and peach, on the presence or absence of design features such as openwork or supplementary weft float, and most recently, on the package of changes associated with “Super Q” such as wider strips, warp floats, and new ways of incorporating lurex.



Figure 63: Dresses tailored from *aşo òkè*, designed by Mrs Patricia Agbakwu of Patsie Creations, Lagos. From a brochure produced for the Seville Expo 1992.

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While the pace of such changes is widely believed to have accelerated over the past few decades, there is some evidence to suggest that the enthusiasm for regular design change we have described was also apparent in local textile production and dress in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps with a degree of exaggeration, William Clarke noted in the course of his travels in the region between 1854-1858, that “Scarcely any two pieces of cloth are found of the same size and colour, as each weaver is continually striving to turn out something extra and fanciful” (1972:273). Elsewhere, discussing beads and bracelets, he commented that “These little trinkets undergo their changes according to fashion just as the cut of a coat or the trimming of a bonnet on Broadway” (1972:244). If an openness to change has been a longstanding feature, we might note in passing one further parallel with European fashion history in suggesting that the shift from a system of court prestige dress to the more widely distributed, if still elite-led, ceremonial dress fashion of the new urban consumers of *aṣọ òkè* we have been discussing in this chapter has affinities with the transition from a heliocentric royal-focused fashion mechanism to a multi-centered democratization of dress over a similar time scale sociologists have perceived in Europe (Gronow 1997:28).

In describing a fashionable woman as *obìnrin àsìkò*, woman of time, Yorùbá terminology captures the way in which fashion plays off the present against memories of the past and expectations of the future (Davis 1992:130). In Nigerian English the constantly repeated request for the “latest” cloth, design, style, with which customers regularly harass cloth traders, tailors and seamstresses evokes the same urge to be up-to-date, while implicitly acknowledging that all change is framed within a continuity of tradition. The “latest” *aṣọ òkè*, is after all, like yesterday’s “latest” still part of a context of design and social practice, linked to the past by relations of similarity as well

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as difference, and will in turn become the basis for further modifications to produce tomorrow's. Fashion does not provide the elusive key that will unlock the hidden "meaning" of *aṣọ òkè*. Rather it is one way of thinking about the cloth that highlights the important role played by design change within the evolving tradition. It is also, we have suggested, a concern that is important on many occasions to the wearers themselves. Yet it is only one among a number of concerns to which the consumers of *aṣọ òkè* may allude. Allusions evoked by the wearing of *aṣọ òkè* may at various times include aspects of individual status and identity, nationalism, a sense of traditionality, gender and morality, wealth and good-fortune. Some, all, or none, of these connotations may have been intended by the individual wearer. In the case of *aṣọ òkè* at least, contrary to the implications of a linguistic theory of dress, the selection of a particular cloth cannot be unambiguously associated with a definite "meaning". Rather it is evidence of continuing participation within an ongoing tradition, which, as we have seen, has a variety of links with earlier dress practice, but has evolved into a process intricately bound up with the changing nature of urban Yorùbá society since the mid-nineteenth century. It is a tradition that embraces and even represents modernity, through the "latest" fashions, rather than standing in opposition to it.

### Notes:

1. Abimbola n.d.
2. Keyes (1993:267-391) makes a useful attempt to reconstruct some of the minutiae of changing clothing fashions in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drawing primarily on archive photographs. For a different perspective on twentieth century Lagos dress see Wass (1975). Also de Negri

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(1962a, 1962b). An excellent account of the social context of cloth consumption in a more localized setting is given in Renne (1995).

3. See also Richard Schechner (1993:43) on the importance of critics as a fourth party, along with actors, audience, and directors, influencing the production and future reception of performance events.

4. Robert Farris Thompson (1973:35) claims that the same verb, *là*, whose primary meaning is “to split” is the root of both *ilàjú*, “civilization”, and of *ilà*, facial marks, allowing him to suggest that Yorùbá associate facial marks with civilization - “This country has become civilized” literally means in Yoruba “This earth has lines upon its face”. Whatever its etymological origins however, in general use the Yorùbá understanding of *ólàjú*, elucidated in Peel (1978), associates “civilization” not with such traditions as facial marking, but with such rather more mundane but highly valued features of the twentieth century as literacy, access to electric light and piped water, maternity clinics etc.

5. Awareness of the composite, corporate nature of personhood also reinforces Burke’s (1996:190) recent warning about the problems of uncritically transferring European discourse about “the” body based on an intellectual history of Christian-inspired mind-body dualism onto local African discussions of bodies and dress.

6. It is more likely to have been camwood.

7. In the published text the word “funeral” appears where I have written “female”. It is apparent from the context that this is a misprint, which I have amended for the sake of clarity. For another, briefer but similar account see Campbell 1861:42. Something Clarke does not detail is the range of named garments, such as types of robes and of trousers, that emerge from later studies. See Johnson 1921:110-113 and Akinwumi 1981.

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8. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 26, 1890s, Photographer unknown. Caption "Oluwo of Iwo."
9. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 26, 1890s, Photographer unknown. Caption "Bale of Ogbomosho and wives".
10. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 11, volume 2, Photographer C.T. Lawrence, circa 1910.
11. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 9, volume 2 "Tribal Studies, 1910", Photographer unknown. Caption "Balogun Alanamu, Ilorin".
12. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File 25, circa 1890, Photographer unknown. Caption Garden Party, Government House. Note also the similar photo in Echeruo 1977. There is the same mustachioed European wearing the same suit and hat on the extreme left of both pictures, but the subjects have been posed slightly differently against the background, and the lay out of chairs, and in the Echeruo picture mats, is different. It may well be that these are records of an annual event.
13. See also Euba 1987.
14. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives, Nigeria File, Photographer Unknown.
15. Customs figures for the import of cotton piece goods into Nigeria in the war-restricted year of 1940 show a total of 79,546,819 square yards, made up of: Grey unbleached 17,577,603; White bleached 21,102,566; Printed 18,352,122; Dyed in the piece 5,699,113; Coloured 16,810,173; Velveteen 5,242. NAI, DCI 4032 s/8 Import Control textiles and Cotton Goods.
16. Kenneth Murray Archive, National Museum Lagos. File 57 Oyo and Ibadan, n.p.
17. For discussion of this literature see Falola 1991, 1993.



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18. This text is reproduced in Wande Abimbola: "Awọn Ọmọ Odu Àpólà Ogbè" (Lagos: Unilag Mimeography, Dept. of African Languages and Literature, n.d. ). It is included, with the following translation in the Appendix "Some Traditional Sayings Expressing Yoruba Philosophy About The Costume", of Dr. Tunde Akinwumi's 1981 Masters Thesis at Amadu Bello University, Zaria (Akinwumi 1981). My thanks are due to Dr Akinwumi for his assistance in locating a copy of this document.

*Aṣọ là níkí o,  
Àwà ò kénìyàn.  
A dífá fún wọn lóde Ènpe,*

*Njọọ gbogbo ayée wọn yíjú poo.  
Wọn ní wọn ó rúbọ lóde Ènpe.*

*Nnkan àwọn ti rí yíí ?*

*Ni wọn lọ lèè ké sáwọn.*

*Aṣọ-là-níkí-a-ò-kénìyàn.  
Ìhòdòhò n gbogbo wọn sì mọọọ rìn.*

*Baálé ò jọmọplé lójú.*

*Ọmọplé ò jọ Baálé lójú.*

*Ọkùnrin ò jọbùlín lójú.*

*Obinrin ò jọkùnrin lójú.*

*Wọn èé kíraa wọn àárọ.*

*Wọn èé ran raa wọn níṣé wọn ó jé.*

*Wọn sáa míbá gbogbo è é lọ  
pábopábo.*

*Ó dá ᠑e, ọ là ᠑e,  
Ni baálé,*

It is the cloth we greet,  
We do not greet the person.  
Ifa was consulted for the people of  
Enpe,  
When their lives turned upside down.  
The priests asked the people of Enpe  
to make sacrifice,  
Why have things gone wrong in this  
manner ?

That is the problem when they  
consulted the diviners called  
Dress-we-greet-not-the-man.  
At the time the people of Enpe went  
naked,  
The family head was not respected by  
the children of the house  
The children were scorned by the  
head.

The man was not respected by the  
woman.

The woman was given no regard by  
the man.

They did not bother to exchange  
greetings in the morning

Neither of them ran errands for the  
other.

They passed their time in utter  
confusion.

After a long time,  
The family head,

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*Óún ọ ha ẹe bá toun yìí já ?*

*Njẹ boun ó se mọọ ẹelẹ ayé lọ náà nìí ?*

*Wọn lẹbọ nì kó rúù*

*Kín lèsí ẹbọ ?*

*Kín loun ó tì lérù ?*

*Wọn ní kọ lọ lẹé rú agbọn òwú kan, Òpòlọpò owó.*

*Káwọn ọmọọ lẹé rẹ náà ó sì rú*

*Gbogbo wọn, òkan ò mọ pábọ,*

*Wọn mọ rúbọ mọ nìí*

*Kí wọn ó ẹe bẹẹ tán nìí,*

*Eni ó rúbọ lẹsùú gbè.*

*Háún nì Eṣú bá kó òwú,*

*Ó kó o tọ àwọn àgbàlagbà lọ.*

*Wọn ti gbọn ọn.*

*Wọn gbọn ọn tán, Eṣú nran án.*

*Bẹẹ nì wọn nígbe e é fọlọyà.*

*Aláṣọ ntaṣọ,*

*Ngba é e péjọ méjọ nìí,*

*Wọn ti hunṣọ parí.*

*Wọn dì í bámbámú.*

*Wọn yọ kọrọ.*

*Wọn fún baálé.*

*Wọn ní láàárọ òla,*

*N té e bora jáda nù un nì.*

*Bílẹ́ ti mọ.*

*Tí baálé mú igbá tí é bọjú,*

*Ó sì mọṣọ yìí,*

*Lọ pakájàa rẹ*

*Lọ bọ sẹnu òṣẹrọ.*

Asked his priest: how could he make a success of his life ?

Should he continue to live in confusion ?

He was asked to make a sacrifice

What should he sacrifice ?

What atonement should he make ?

They asked him to sacrifice a basketful of cotton, plenty of cowries

The children of the house were also asked to make similar sacrifice

None of them offered half-measure,

All of them made full sacrifice.

Soon after making the sacrifice,

Eṣu was eager to assist those who sacrificed.

At once Eṣu collected all the cotton,

He carried it to the elders.

They removed the seeds,

They finished removing the seeds,

Eṣu spun

After they finished it

They gave them to a weaver,

The weaver weaves the yarn into cloth,

At the end of eight days,

The weaving of the cloth has finished

They packed the cloth very carefully,

They went stealthily.

They gave the piece to the family head.

They told him that tomorrow morning,

This is what you should cover your body with as you go out of your room

At daybreak.

The family head took a calabash of water to wash his face

And he took this piece of cloth,

And tied it across his shoulder,

He stood at the entrance of the doorway.

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

Wọn ò rókóó baálé,  
Wọn ò rẹ̀pòṣò rẹ̀.

Irí tí wọn ó rí baálé lẹnu ọ̀nàà rẹ̀  
lọ́pọ̀kán.

Hàà ! Bàbáa wa,

Bóo wáá ni ?

Ngbòó débè.

È káààrò lo kọ wí.

Ó dọ́bálẹ̀.

Wọn ní hìnn,

Àsẹ̀ aṣọ̀ tiẹ̀ niyì èyàn.

Ifá wí pé kéléyiun ọ̀ mọ̀ rin dọtí.

Baálé ní hìnn, àṣóun ọ̀ jọjú ?

Ó kó o ran 'gbákejii baálé.

Ó di pọ̀mọ̀ 'lé náà ò rìn hòdò mọ̀.

Ayéé wọn bèrẹ̀ sí dọgba.

Wọn níjọraa wọn lójú.

Wọn ní bẹ́ẹ̀ gégẹ̀ n ni àwọn awo  
awọn nṣenu re

Tí ọ̀n fí npe 'Fá.

Aṣọ̀ la níkí o

A ò kénìyàn.

A dífá fún wọn lóde Ènpe,

Njọ̀ gbogbo ayéé wón yíjú poo.

Èkú la ọ̀ mọ̀ wò,

A ò léégún rí.

A dífá fáṣọ̀.

Tí nlo bá wọn tóde Ènpe ẹ̀.

Èròò 'po,

Èrò Ófà,

È tètè wáá bá ni ní màrínriin tire.

Màrínrín 're là á bá ni lésẹ̀

Ọ̀barìṣà.

They could not see his penis,

They could no longer see his  
testicles.

When they saw him on the threshold.

Hail ! Father.

How did you come by this ?

When he walked up to them,

'Good morning' he said first.

They prostrated to greet him,

They exclaimed and said,

So, it is the dress that makes the man,

Ifá says the client should wear neat  
clothes,

The family head exclaimed: so I am  
now highly regarded

He spread the secret to his deputy.

Soon, even the child no longer  
walked about nakedly.

They began to enjoy life.

They gave each other due regard.

They burst into joy, praising the  
wisdom of Ifá.

Just as their diviners were praising  
Ifá.

It is the dress that we greet

We do not greet the person.

Ifá was consulted for the people of  
Enpe.

When their lives turned upside down.

It is the masquerade that we can see

We cannot see the masquerader,

Consulted Ifá for cloth,

When he was going to improve the  
lot of the people of Enpe.

Inhabitants of Ipo town,

Indigenes of Ofa town,

Come quickly and celebrate our good  
luck with us.

Good luck surrounds all those who  
worship Ọ̀barìṣà.

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

(I have not been able to locate a town called Ènpe, but it would in any case be an over literal reading of the text to become too concerned with the location.)

19. Owomoyela 1988:517 non paginated, references are to proverb numbers.

20. Delano 1966:139

21. Owomoyela 1988:796

22. Delano 1966:

23. Here he refers to the compound verb *dájò* (Abraham 1958:123), meaning “contributed”, ie. cloth that the family contributed. However see also Abraham 1958:351. *ìjòdá* = uniform, *a jò dásò yìí* = we ordered clothes of a uniform pattern.

24. NAI, CSO 16/7 06076 “Notes on the Customs and Superstitions of the Indigenous [Yoruba] Inhabitants of Oyo Province” by Capt. W.A. Ross CMG. Page 20.

25. However in the peripheral northeastern community of Bùnù, where a dialect related to Yorùbá is spoken, special red cloths were used in the funerals of important men and women. See Renne 1995:85.

26. Interview: Chief Shobande, Lagos, 17/6/1996

27. Interview: Chief Shobande, Lagos, 17/6/1996

28. Harrell-Bond 1975:193-4. Discussing the Freetown custom of “Ashobe” the author cites an informant who recalls that relatives from Lagos who attended the marriage of the daughter of a Lagos woman, one Mrs Nettie May, in the 1920s, “put on the same dress material at home after the wedding and reception. This was the introduction of “Ashoebe.””

29. Interview: Chief Francis Taiwo, Òyó, 17/7/1996.

30. The term “native” is still widely used in Nigeria to refer to dress styles that have evolved from local traditions and seems to have lost any pejorative

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

connotations in this context. Thus one can frequently hear women say things such as “I was wearing native that day.”

31. NAI Ije Prof 1/1/3366 Aso Ebi. Page 3

32. NAI Ije Prof 1/1/3366 Aso Ebi. Page 1

33. Daily Service 13/11/1946, Akinwumi 1990:176

34. A number of African women scholars have reacted hostilely to the uncritical transposition of Western feminist theory onto African societies as obscuring a more nuanced reading of women's roles and persuasively argued that colonialist stereotypes did much to inform a restriction of women's prospects over the past century, while opening up other areas of opportunity. See, for example, Amadiume 1987.

35. See Wipper 1972 for a discussion of similar material in the press in East Africa. See Keyes-Adenaike 1993:323-342 for an American feminist perspective on dress and the media in Nigeria as an expression of patriarchal society. Also Bastien 1996:97-133 for an interesting discussion of the recent adoption of *agbádá* and other “masculine” attire by wealthy Igbo women.

36. A full list of these names is among the accession notes to the Bascom Collection, which also includes a wide range of other objects collected among the Yorùbá at the same period, including loom parts, at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. My thanks are due to Dr Enid Schildkrout for making this collection accessible to me, and to Mrs Anne Parsons for her patience and assistance. A duplicate collection of the cloth samples is in the Lowie Museum, Berkeley, and a full list of the names, together with a comprehensive technical analysis of the samples is part of an unpublished manuscript (Bascom and Boyer, n.d.) in the William Bascom Archives at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

37. Personal comment, A.Oyetade, 1995.

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38. Boyer, in her article on royal names (1983:98), makes the following point with regard to the sex of cloth consumers: "Unfortunately, informants were not asked to indicate whether the club names for the cloth referred to male or female clubs. However it was Bill Bascom's belief that those which refer to co-wives, to children, and to trading in foodstuffs, for example, were named by women's clubs."

39. Interview: Mr Sanni Adeniyi, Òyó, 10/11/1995

40. Although as with many weavers, if one turns up with a set of cloth samples and insist on knowing their names, people who wish to appear knowledgeable or obliging will sometimes be able to name them, calling on their recollections of names used in the past. More commonly though, people will just call them names that refer to the type of cloth design or the material used, such as *olónà*, with weft float, or "shine-shine", with lurex.

41. There are numerous accounts in the literature of "Yoruba marriage customs." See for example Delano (1937:121-141), and Fadipe (1970:65) for early local descriptions.

42. With the recent move to wider strips less pieces of cloth are needed but the numbers have not yet become standardized. A package of twenty five 5 1/2 inch width strips is usually regarded as the new norm for a "complete."

43. Bello 1982 , Akinwumi 1990:56, Delano 1937:110

44. Interview: Chief (Mrs) Dada, Lagos, 13/5/1996, Chief Shobande, Lagos, 12/3/1996.

45. Interview: Chief (Mrs) Dada, Lagos, 13/5/1996

46. Interview: Mrs P. Oyelola, Ìbàdàn, 27/6/1996

47. My thanks to Dr Akin Oyetade for elucidating this terminology.

48. Interview: Mrs Odutayo, Lagos, 30/1/1996

49. "*Ògá ní gbé ògá pòn ní ìsìn*", Interview: Alhaji Kẹgunhẹ, Ìsẹyìn, 5/3/96.

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

50. Remarks of this type, in English, Yorùbá, or the code-switching between the two that is characteristic of much everyday conversation, were listened to by myself and my Yorùbá assistant in a variety of contexts, including at markets, in fabric shops, and passing comments on attire at ceremonial occasions. I often left small groups of newly acquired samples lying around in houses where I was a regular guest and frequently people would pick them up to admire and evaluate new designs amongst themselves in casual conversations using expressions such as these. I was concerned that perhaps there was some more abstract vocabulary that was no longer in everyday use, but when I discussed the issue with two elderly men who were senior officials of a society, the Ègbé Ìjìnlẹ̀ Yorùbá, dedicated to the preservation of the Yorùbá language (Interview: Chief Shobande, Lagos, 17/6/1996, Mr Oladipo Yemitan, Lagos, 11/5/1996) they too were only aware of comments of the same type.

51. I discussed the issue of praising cloths with Chief Lamidi Ogundiya Iroko, a traditional medicine specialist and a senior chief, the Aṣípa Ọḍẹ, of the Ọ̀yọ́ hunter's society, who was noted for his skill in reciting *ìjalá*, hunter's praise songs. Interview, Ọ̀yọ́, 30/6/1996.

52. *Lagos Daily News* 5/4/1932, editorial "Native Dress".

53. This may be simply a matter of politeness towards people who are today often neighbours, business partners, fellow members of the church or mosque. I did often notice amused or disparaging remarks about the dress of nomadic Fulani men and women who are generally outside of this urban society.

54. On these shawls, woven on the single-heddle loom, see Aronson 1992.

55. In their discussion of Surinam Maroon society, for example, Price and Price (1980:200) found it useful to distinguish between "long-term unidirectional trends" and what they referred to as "fads and fashions", noting that "the rate of change in the fads and fashions of industrial society (Paris women's clothing, recent North American teenage footwear, songs on the hit

## Chapter Six - Consumption of Cloth

parade) is fully matched by the pace of innovation and obsolescence in Maroon sartorial and musical domains.”

56. This lady runs a cosmetics manufacturing and distribution business, and a school for beauticians. She is married to a prominent retired politician Chief T.O.S. Benson.



## Chapter Seven - Conclusion

### Conclusion:

#### **Weaving a Tradition: Design Innovation in Aṣọ Òkè.**

“*Ká rí owó dá àrà*” - Yorùbá prayer: “may we get money to create novelty.”  
(Adepegba 1983:62)

There is a substantial and growing body of art historical literature devoted to the study of individual artistic creativity among the Yorùbá. Inevitably, given the priorities imposed until recently on Africanist art historical scholarship by the Primitivist appropriation of African sculpture, the bulk of this work has been concerned with sculptural traditions of pre-colonial origin (Bascom 1973, Carroll 1961b, 1967, Chappell 1972, 1997, Picton 1994, Thompson 1969, Walker 1994). Recent work on artistic innovation in performance (Drewel 1992, 1994) and contemporary painting (Stroter-Bender 1994, Harris 1994, 1997) represent a welcome broadening of approach. The importance of *oríkì* as both a medium of innovation and a meta-discourse commenting on the innovation process and praising successful artistic initiators has also been highlighted (Abimbola 1994, Barber 1991, Pemberton 1994, Yai 1994). In moving away from an earlier emphasis on conservatism and replication in unsatisfactory models of “tribal” style (Kasfir 1984) and “traditionality” (Picton 1992), scholars are beginning to assemble the basic documentation to support assertions of the fundamental role of individual distinctiveness and singularity in Yorùbá artistic practice, such as that recently made by Yai: “In a culture where *orí*, the principle of individuality, is perceived as a deity that informs and shapes the world view and behaviour of persons, it is simply “natural” that the privileged idiom of artistic expression, indeed the mode of existence of art, should be through constant departure.” (Yai 1994:113). Reviewing the literature on Equatorial Africa, Guyer (1996) recently noted data to sustain parallel moves in fields of Africanist study as

## Chapter Seven - Conclusion

diverse as demographics, cognitive anthropology, and philosophy, revealing evidence of the widespread existence of phenomena she dubbed “traditions of invention” - namely “the social production of multiplicity amongst singular persons who were each at their own frontier of expertise, and their situational mobilization for action through social composition” (1996:2 .)

The literature on *aṣo òkè* weaving has also contributed to the study of the role of individual artistry in the Yorùbá-speaking region. We have already discussed (page 48 above) the case of the *Ìlọrin* master weaver Yaya Olabintan, documented by Anne O'Hear (1988,1990), who appears to have been responsible for the weaving of a number of wider strip cloths with remarkably complex supplementary weft float designs during the 1930s and subsequent decades (see Figure 9, page 48.) A second innovatory weaver, mentioned by Poyner in his survey account of *Ọwọ* weaving (1980), is documented by Akinwumi (1993) in a collection of seminar papers exploring aspects of creativity (Campbell 1993). Obamadesara, an *Ọwọ* indigene of royal descent, died in 1956 at an advanced age (Akinwumi 1993:161.) Although there are now a few young women weaving on double-heddle and European designed looms in *Ọwọ*, at that time Obamadesara is reported to have been the only double-heddle loom weaver active in an area that is better known for the wide variety of cloths woven within the long standing tradition of womens' single-heddle weaving (Lamb & Holmes 1980:206, Poyner 1980). He appears to have learnt the basic techniques of narrow-strip weaving while serving as a soldier in the *Èkìtì* area during the wars of the late nineteenth century, before drawing on the multiple shed stick decorative techniques utilized by *Ọwọ* women weavers, including his wife who wove alongside him in the same courtyard. He is said to have woven only some fifteen or so cloths (Akinwumi 1993:158) although it seems unlikely that such fully realized and innovatory designs could have emerged from so limited a corpus of works.

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Akinwumi reports seeing four of these, and I have examined and photographed two, probably from the same four, in 1997.




Figure 64: One of the cloths woven by the innovatory Ọwọ weaver Obamadesara.

Although the cloths achieve their primary design effects by carefully organized variations in weft colours on a balanced plain weave cloth, small areas of weft insert and tapestry weave<sup>1</sup> are also used. Shawls are constructed from five strips of cloth, each some seven inches in width. The most distinctive feature is a naturalistic lizard motif at each end of each strip. In the context of our interest in artistic individuality, it is also worth noting that Akinwumi records that Obamadesara was also remembered for his innovatory achievements in house design, mat weaving, and tailoring (1993:160.)

Valuable and interesting though the documentation of the work of Olabintan and Obamadesara undoubtedly are however, one cannot help observing how little influence their design innovations have had on the mainstream of *aşo òkè* production. Although the study of individual innovators is important, we need also to consider the processes Guyer (op.cit.) refers to as “social composition.” How are those individuals responsible for

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innovations and artistic creativity situated and what impact does this have on the nature of and responses to their actions ? It is the exploration of these broader aspects, encompassing cloth production, but also distribution and consumption, with which we have been concerned in this thesis. Throughout these processes we have encountered numerous individuals creatively engaged in sometimes idiosyncratic strategies, producing change and novelty manifest in cloth design, but also in the institutions and procedures of local textile production, exchange, and consumption. A key finding that has emerged is the extent to which these aspects of creativity are bound together and interconnected. The popular Yorùbá prayer cited above, "*Ká rí owó dá àrà* - may we get money to create novelty" (Adepegba 1983:62) points us to local recognition of the fundamental importance of economic factors in the social location of creativity. Although we have found it useful to draw a distinction between incremental change, which as we have seen takes place on a daily basis throughout the *aṣo òkè* tradition as the parameters of the existing set of techniques, materials, and institutionalized practices of production, distribution and use are explored, and the rarer but more far reaching incidence of innovatory changes that reconfigure these parameters, it should be apparent that economic incentives play a primary role in both forms. Prestige is clearly also important, although as Barber (1995) has pointed out, wealth and prestige are closely, if not inextricably linked in contemporary Yorùbá culture. While both incentives are doubtless present in the majority of cases<sup>2</sup>, the balance between them varies, with direct pecuniary interest coming to the fore in the activities of most master weavers and a more diffuse concern with prestige the priority in most contexts of cloth consumption.

 It is here to that we can locate a clue to the limited design impact of the two innovatory weavers referred to above. In the case of Obamadesara he is said to have presented his cloths as gifts to *Òwò* princesses (Akinwumi

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1993:159), bypassing the market distribution system altogether, in a town which was far removed from the mainstream *aşo òkè* industry. Yaya Olabintan, working in Ilorin, one of the major *aşo òkè* weaving centres, was the Emir's "prize weaver", working extensively for his royal patron (O'Hear 1988:7.) He also wove a number of cloths for European customers, notably J.D.Clarke<sup>3</sup> (see illustration in Clarke 1938). Although he may have woven cloths for other local customers it is likely that these were private commissions rather than market based transactions. It is, I would suggest, the narrow circulation of these cloths produced mainly for prestige, rather than any restrictions imposed by the weaver on the dissemination of the techniques of production that accounts for their limited design impact. While Obamadesara apparently did not pass on his method to anyone (Akinwumi 1993:161), and Olabintan taught only his sons, of whom only one continued to weave (1988:9), it seems likely that any competent master weaver could have replicated them if there was sufficient economic incentive to do so. With the exception of Obamadesara's use of tapestry weave, both drew only on the familiar repertoire of weaving techniques, albeit in a more than usually complex configuration. We have already seen that in recent years *aşo òkè* weavers were able to reproduce the far more radical technical novelty of supplementary warp float decoration from studying the finished cloth alone.

The presence of a novel and innovatory design is not in itself sufficient to promote far reaching change. Close examination of some of the extensive, if mostly poorly documented, holdings of *aşo òkè* in museum and private collections around the world, brings to light numerous examples of idiosyncratic design variations which have apparently not had any discernible impact. For example, in a private collection in New York is a cloth where a weaver has completely covered the central area of each strip in supplementary

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weft float, using white rayon floats to create the outline of what appears to be a repeated bird motif against a background of blue rayon floats.



Figure 65: Detail of an aṣọ òkè cloth showing an unusual and innovative use of weft float. Private collection, New York.

Whatever the immediate local sensation a cloth such as this may have achieved, it can be seen not to have been incorporated into the wider design repertoire. More significantly perhaps, there is evidence to suggest the presence of the supplementary warp float technique in the work of at least one aṣọ òkè weaver long before it became one of the distinguishing characteristics of the far reaching changes associated with the introduction of Ewe weavers into the aṣọ òkè market in the early 1990s. Among the collection of some eighty or so small samples of aṣọ òkè strips assembled by Kenneth Murray between the 1920s and 1950s, now in the Lagos Museum, there is a single example where the pattern of warp stripes alternates with warp floats.

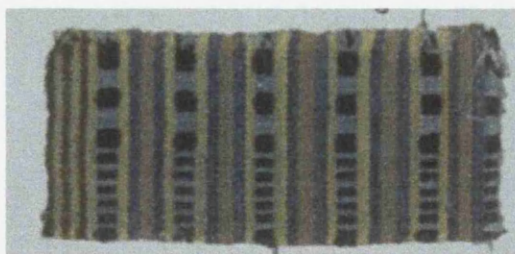


Figure 66: A sample from the Murray Collection showing the use of dark blue warp floats. Lagos Museum.

Although unfortunately this collection has become separated from any detailed collection data, Murray has recorded two Yorùbá names for the sample, *owó*



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*dě*, money arrives, and *eléyín ìrẹ̀*, cricket's teeth, on the reverse of the card to which it is attached. While we can speculate that the origin of this unexpected development lie in the thriving trade in textiles between Ghana and Nigeria to which we have referred above<sup>4</sup>, in the context the Yorùbá names at least suggest that it may have been the work of a local weaver.

It is the conjunction of distinctive designs with their acceptance by leading consumers, a process which is mediated by the intervention of professional cloth traders, that provides the motor for the continuous processes of design change, both incremental and innovatory. Those master weavers who are in regular contact with the largest traders, dealing in turn with the most prestigious consumers, profit from their early access to novel designs, stimulating them in turn to further modifications and variations. Changes in design, which may be initiated by any of the players in the process, are rapidly diffused amongst these leading participants, with less successful traders, smaller scale weavers, and consumers in more remote areas lagging behind. Yet *aşo òkè* design is as much about continuity as it is change, situated within institutions and procedures that are themselves subject to both continuity and change. This thesis commenced with a consideration of the notions of time and traditionality in relation to Yorùbá textiles. In the following chapter we explored the evidence for a history of local weaving technology and of *aşo òkè* design. The weaving compound was identified as a crucial site of creativity within a long-standing institution of *aşo òkè* production, while more recent moves into *aşo òkè* weaving by women emerged as a long term threat to male master weavers. The consumption of *aşo òkè* was explored as a field in which complex and at times conflicting ideas about the role of dress in relation to diverse aspects of gender and political identity were played out through changing contexts of cloth use. Linking the spheres of production and consumption are cloth traders, themselves adopting diverse strategies to cope

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with changing conditions and intense competition, with the case of “Super Q” providing a remarkable instance of the potential for far reaching innovatory change, impacting on both the design of *aşo òkè* and the organization of the local weaving industry. Each of these intersecting fields provides evidence of both elements of long lasting continuities and recent rapid changes, holding out the prospect of equally dramatic and eventful future developments in an industry that continues to thrive in the often adverse circumstances of contemporary Nigeria. The tradition continues.

### Notes:

1. Akinwumi (1993:158) objects to Poyner's description of the cloth as using tapestry weave, pointing out that this is usually applied to weft-faced cloths. Nevertheless the tapestry technique is the same when used as here in a balanced construction to achieve a muted effect. In her account of tapestry weave Emery notes “When the principle of discontinuous wefts is applied in open or balanced instead of weft-faced weaves, changes in weft color will still serve to create pattern areas, although muted by unvarying warp color” (1966:78).
2. In his study of aesthetic innovation among Ashanti wood carvers Silver (1981:108) found that both the most financially successful and the economically marginal carvers regularly produced innovations, albeit of a different type. He also noted that prestige was the main motivating factor, there being few economic rewards of successful innovation since any new ideas could be freely and rapidly imitated. Unfortunately, although he touched on the impact of traders, he did not extend his study to any sustained evaluation of the contribution that traders or consumers of sculpture made to the processes of innovation. In the case of *aşo òkè* we saw that economically marginal master weavers are rarely in a position to lead innovatory development since they are



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reliant on pre-placed orders from a mostly local clientele that generally lags behind the cutting edge of design development.

3. These are now in the British Museum, with others of Olabintan's cloths in the Danford Collection, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, and the Lagos Museum.

4. In chapter five (page 248) the wholesale export of Yorùbá cloth to Ghana was discussed. The import of Ghanaian cloth into Nigeria is less well documented and seems to have been on a much smaller scale. However, in addition to the practice of Yorùbá traders bringing back samples of ordered patterns, referred to above, an unpublished paper, dated to around 1950, by Fr Kevin Carroll, noted the presence in Ilorin market, among others, of Ewe cloth from Keta. (Carroll n.d.). Much later, Lamb reported that Yorùbá dealers were major buyers of Ewe cloth in Agbozume market near the Ghana/Togo border (1975:166).

## Appendix A

### Appendix A:

#### Patterns Woven at Ilé Èkejó Compound 7 June 1995 - 5 June 1996

Photographs follow on page 411

Samples of all patterns listed are held by the British Museum.

#### Key to Table:

N = 4 in width	Wp= Warp stripes	C= Cream
W= > 4 ins width	Wf= Weft stripes	Y= Yellow
Lx= Lurex	Op= Openwork	R= Red
Sl= Silver	Jq= "Jacquard"	G= Green
Gl= Gold	Ik= Ikat	Bl= Black
Br= Butter(Pale Gold)	Pl= Plain	F= Fuchsia
S= 'Silk'	T= Turquoise	Wh= White
M= Mirai	Bg= Beige	Pu= Purple

/ between colours indicates that

SWf = Supplementary Weft Float

the two colours alternate in warp

SWp = Supplementary Warp Float

Unless otherwise indicated all threads are cotton. O=Orange

Date first woven is given Day/Month/Year.

Pattern.	Warp	Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom Number	Date
P001	N	C,G,R,BrLx	C, R	Wp	5, 6, 9, 15, 24, 25, 26	7/6/95
P002	N	BrLx,GLx,Bl	Bl, BLx	Wp	8, 17	7/6/95
P003	N	Bl,GILx,BLx	Bl	Wp	1	7/6/95
P004	N	F,B,Y, GILx,T,G	F	Wp	28	7/6/95
P005	N	YS,GS,C	Y	Wp	2	7/6/95
P006	W	O,GLx,RLx,BLx	GLx,O	Wp	29	8/6/95
P007	W	YS,BS,SILx,Wh, GILx	Bl	Wp	2 9 30	11/6/95
P008	N	G,Pu,C,GILx	Bl, GILx	Wp	17	11/6/95
P009	N	B,GLx,BLx	Bl	Wp	7,9, 14,24, 25	12/6/95
P010	N	R,BrLx	R, BrLx	Wp	13	12/6/95
P011	N	R,RLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	1	12/6/95
P012	N	Y,F,GILx	R	Wp	19	17/6/95
P013	N	OS,BrLx	O	Wp	8	17/6/95
P014	W	YS,G,GILx, SILx,Bl	Bl	Wp	9	17/6/95
P015	W	RS,YS,GILx, SILx	Bl	Wp	30	17/6/95
P016	W	YS	Bl	Pl	29	17/6/95
P017	N	F,T,GILx	F	Wp	26	18/6/95
P018	N	PuLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	18	20/6/95

## Appendix A

Pattern		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Looms	Date
P019	N	Pink/Wh,BLx, SILx	Bl	Wp	17	20/6/95
P020	N	R,BrLx,	R	Wp	11	20/6/95
P021	N	GiLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	1 2 13	20/6/95
P022	N	SILx,Wh	Wh	Pl	2	20/6/95
P023	N	GLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	6	20/6/95
P024	N	BLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	23	20/6/95
P025	N	OS,BrLx	O	Wp	19	21/6/95
P026	N	GLx,Wh,Y,SLx	T	Wp	28	21/6/95
P027 -29		incorrectly allocated.				
P030	N	F,Y,Bl,G,B,T, R	F	Wp	3, 5, 6,14,16 24	26/6/95
P031	N	GiLx,Bl	Y	Wp	12	26/6/95
P032	N	Wh,SILx,Pu	Wh GiLx	Jq, Wp	28	26/6/95
P033		incorrectly allocated				
P034	N	BrLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	9	26/6/95
P035	N	Bg	Bg	Pl	8	28/6/95
P036	N	RLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	2	28/6/95
P037	N	R,G,GiLx	Bl	Wp	19	30/6/95
P038	N	Wh,R,Bl,GiLx	Bl	Wp	27	5/7/95
P039	N	Bg,Wh,SILx,GiLx	Bg	Wp	19	6/7/95
P040	N	F,Y,Bl, T	F BrLx	Wp	3 12 15 16 18	10/7/95
P041	N	Pu,T,R, Y,Wh	Bl	Wp	27	10/7/95
P042	N	R,B,G,BrLx	F, SILx	Ik	25	8/7/95
P043	N	GS,PuLx,GiLx	Bl	Wp	3	13/7/95
P044	N	BLx,Wh,Bl	Bl	Wp	18	13/7/95
P045	N	BrLx,R,Bl	Bl	Wp	9	13/7/95
P046	N	Wh,G,SILx	Wh, G	Op, Wf, SWf	25, 26	13/7/95
P047	N	T,SILx	T	Wp	19	16/7/95
P048	N	Wh,BLx,SILx	G,GiLx	Wp	19	22/7/95
P049	W	PuS	Bl	Pl	26 27	25/7/95
P050	N	Bg,G,SILx	Bg, YS	Op, Wp, SWf	9 14 17 25	26/7/95
P051	N	R,Bl,SILx,GiLx,T	Bl	Wp	2 3 4 5	26/7/95

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Looms	Date
P052	N	G, Y, Pu	Bl, SILx	Op, Wp	28	24/7/95
P053	W	PuS, PinkS, Bl BrLx	Bl	Wp	30	1/8/95
P054	N	Wh	GILx, Wh	Pl	27	1/8/95
P055	N	BS, GILx	B	Wp	27	28/7/95
P056	N	T, SILx	T, Pu	Wp, Op SWf	34	28/7/95
P057	N	G, R, Y, Wh, GILx	Bl	Wp	34	1/8/95
P058	N	TS, SILx	Bl	Wp	8	1/8/95
P059	N	Y, GLx, GILx, PuLx	Y	Wp	4, 5, 15, 16	2/8/95
P060	N	F, G, Y, SILx	F	Wp	13, 31	2/8/95
P061	N	SILx, Pink	Wh, BrLx	Wp, Jq	29	2/8/95
P062	N	RLx, R	R	Pl	17	7/8/95
P063	N	Y, Pu, B, Bl, R, G, GILx	Y	Wp	1, 4, 5, 6, 15, 16, 17	7/8/95
P064	N	Maroon, BLx, Bl	Pu	Wp	28	7/8/95
P065a	N	BS, OS, BrLx	Bl	Wp	8	11/8/95
P065b	N	B, O, BrLx	Bl	Wp	2, 5	1/12/95
P066	N	Wh, B, GILx	Wh	Wp	26	11/8/95
P067	W	WhM, RM, GILx	Bl	Wp	30	14/8/95
P068	N	Wh, Bl, BLx, SILx	F, SILx	Wp	28	18/8/95
P069	N	SILx, Wh	G, SILx	Pl	27	18/8/95
P070	N	Wh, GILx, Pu, G	G	Wp	24	18/8/95
P071	N	OS, BrLx	Bl	Wp		
P072a	N	SILx, GILx, Wh, PuLx	T, GILx	Wp	25	22/8/95
P072b	N	SILx, GILx, Wh, PuLx	G, Wh	Wp	25	22/8/95
P073	N	PinkLx, F	F, BLx	Pl	29	22/8/95

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P074	N	Wh,GILx	Wh, Bg, BrownS	SWf, Op	34	21/8/95
P075	N	B,Wh,SILx	Wh, SILx	Wp, SWf	28	22/8/95
P076	N	RS,Ys,GILx,	Bl	Wp	29	22/8/95
P077	N	Wh,Bl,BLx, GLx	Bl, SILx	Wp	28	23/8/95
P078	W	RM/WhM,R M, WhM, BLx,	R	Wp	29	24/8/95
P079	N	T,G,GILx	Bl	Wp	19	28/8/95
P080	N	PinkLx,F	F , SILx	Jq	29	28/8/95
P081	N	G,BrLx, RLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	17	28/8/95
P082	N	Bg,Wh	Wh	Wp	6	11/9/95
P083	N	T,Br	F	Wp Op	6	12/9/95
P084	N	T/BLx, GILx	Bl	Wp Op	17	4/9/95
P085	N	SILx,RLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	18	4/9/95
P086	N	PinkLx,F	RLx	Pl	29	4/9/95
P087	N	R,Y,Bl, SILx	R	Wp	8	4/9/95
P088	N	Pu,Wh,GLx	Pu, SILx	Wp	28	22/9/95
P089	N	B,Wh,BLx	B, SILx	Wp	8	7/9/95
P090	N	Bl,GILx,SILx	Bl	Wp	34	14/9/95
P091	N	G,GILx, RLx, PuLx	G	Wp	17	3/10/95
P092	N	T,BLx,RLx, SILx,GILx	T	Wp	3 4 5 6 11 23	22/9/95
P093	N	F,B,SILx, GILx	T	Wp	19	11/9/95
P094	N	F,G	R, SILx	Wp	8	14/9/95
P095		R,GILx	Wh, G	Wp Wf	30	22/9/95
P096	N	Y,BLx,BrLx	Y	Wp	29	3/10/95
P097	N	F,B,GILx, SILx	F	Wp	28	25/9/95
P098	N	YS,OS,BrLx	Bg	Wp	8	3/10/95
P099	N	Bg,F,SILx	Wh	Wp	28	12/9/95
P100	N	GS,B,Y,SILx	Bl	Wp	30	12/9/95

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P101	N	Y,T,GILx	Y, Bl	Wp Wf SWf Op	28	28/9/95
P102	N	O,T, R,GILx	Wh,Bl	Wp Wf	30	28/9/95
P103	N	B,Y,R, Wh,GILx	Bl	Wp	29	28/9/95
P104	W	GS,RS,BrLx,Sl Lx	F	Wp	26	16/10/95
P105	W	BIS,PinkS,BM, BrLx,PuLx,BLx SILx	Bl	Wp	28	14/9/95
P106	W	YS,WhS,BLx	Bl	Wp	29	14/9/95
P107	W	TS,PinkS,GILx	Bl	Wp	30	14/9/95
P108	N	BrownS,SILx	Brown, WhS, GILx	Wp Op SWf	2	14/10/95
P109	N	OS	O	Pl	29	14/10/95
P110	N	Y,PuLx,SILx	Y	Wp	6	12/10/95
P111	N	F,Wh,Bg,SILx	Wh	Wp	3 4 5 6 7 12 13 25 26	3/10/95
P112	N	Pu,Y,G,R, Wh	Pu, PuLx	Wp	6	14/10/95
P113	N	Y,SILx,GILx, BLx	Bl	Wp	30	25/9/95
P114	N	Bg,Wh,Y,F, SILx	Wh	Wp	2	19/10/95
P115	N	SILx,BrLx,RLx GLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	11 12	19/10/95
P116	N	B,BrLx,RLx	B	Wp	2	12/10/95
P117	N	G,Wh,Bg,SILx	Wh	Wp	29	12/10/95
P118	N	Wh,BrLx	Wh	Wp	1	12/10/95
P119a	N	F,T,GILx	F	Wp	8	12/10/95
P119b	N	F,T,GILx	Bg	Wp	8	16/10/95
P120	N	Y,G,Wh,GILx	Y, SILx	Wp	4 7	20/10/95
P121	N	RS/RLx,GS/ GLx,TS,YS/Gl Lx	O			19/10/95

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P122	W	OS,RS, GS , BIS,GILx	Bl	Wp	29 30	19/10/95
P123	N	Y	Y, SLx	Pl	23	20/10/95
P124	N	Y,Pu,GnLx	Y, Slx	Wp	23	23/10/95
P125	N	Y, BrLx	Y	Wp	1	21/10/95
P126	N	F,GrLx,GILx	F	Wp	3	21/10/95
P127	N	Gr,Bg,SILx,Wh	Bl,SILx	Wp	4 6	23/10/95
P128	N	RLx,GLx,BLx, Wh	Bl, BrLx	Jq	8	23/10/95
P129	N	T,Y,G,GLx	Bl	Wp	30	23/10/95
P130	N	Y/BrLx,Bl	Y	Wp	27	21/10/95
P131	N	T,Wh,GILx	Wh	Wp	29	21/10/95
P132	N	G/GLx,O,GILx	G	Wp Op	30	21/10/95
P133	N	O	O, GILx	Pl	26	21/10/95
P134	N	G,GLx,Wh,SILx	Bl,SILx	Wp	2	14/10/95
P135	N	G,GILx,SILx	G,GILx	Wp Op	19	25/10/95
P136	N	SILx,GILx,G	Y,SILx	Wp	4	25/10/95
P137	N	R,G,BLx,SILx	Bl, SILx	Wp	7	25/10/95
P138	N	Wh,Pu,BronzeLx	Wh	Wp	28	25/10/95
P139	N	Y,G,T, GLx,BrLx	Y,BrLx	Wp	30	25/10/95
P140	N	C,Pu	Br, RLx	Wp	27	25/10/95
P141	N	C,Pu,R	Y, SILx	Wp	26	25/10/95
P142	N	Y,G,T, R,RLx,SILx	T, Wh	Wp, Wf	27	24/10/95
P143	W	BIM,GILx,OM, YM,WhM,RM	Bl	Wp, SWp	1	26/10/95
P144	N	BLx,BrLx,Bl	Bl	Pl	3 4 5 13 15	26/10/95
P145	N	C,Bg,GILx	C, GILx	Wp	23	3/11/95
P146	N	Y,BLx,PuLx,SILx	Y	Wp	4 5 6	6/11/95
P147	W	BS,SILx,BrLx	Bl	Wp	29	6/11/95
P148	W	SILx,PuLx,GILx,Bl	Bl	Wp	30	6/11/95
P149	W	BrLx,RLx,SILx,Bl	Bl	Wp	30	8/11/95
P150	N	Bg,T,Wh,GILx	Wh	Wp	26	8/11/95
P151	W	G,BrLx	G	Wp	25	9/11/95
P152	N	GS,BrLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	8	11/11/95
P153	N	Brown,C,GILx	Bg, GILx	Wp	19	13/11/95
P154	N	Bl,RLx,BrLx	Bl	Wp	27	14/11/95

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P155	N	Bg,GILx	Bg	Wp	1	13/11/95
P156	W	Bl,GILx,SILx,Pu, BrLx,GLx,PuLx, BLx	Bl	Wp SWp	25	14/11/95
P157	N	T,SILx	T	Wp	8 19	20/11/95
P158	N	RLx,SILx,BLx,Wh	Bl	Wp	29 4	20/11/95
P159	N	G,OM,BrLx	Bl	Wp	6 24	21/11/95
P160	N	BrLx,Bg	Bg	Pl	1	21/11/95
P161	N	TS,YS,GS,BIS,RS	T, GILx	Wp	29	22/11/95
P162	N	Wh,T	T,SILx	Wp, Jq	1	24/11/95
P163	N	Y,OM,Bl SILx,GILx	O	Wp	7	27/11/95
P164	N	Wh,BLx,PuLx,SILx, GILx	Wh,PuLx	Wp, Jq	11	27/11/95
P165	N	DarkB,LightB	DarkB, LightB	Wp, Wf	1	28/11/95
P166	N	Y,GLx,PuLx, BrLx	Y	Wp	26	30/11/95
P167	W	WhM,GILx	Bl	Wp	19	1/12/95
P168	N	F,BS,Bl,Wh,Y, BrLx,T	F,SILx	Wp	8 26	4/12/95
P169	N	BrLx,Bl	C	Wp	7	4/12/95
P170	N	Pu,R,Y,Bl	Bl,BrLx	Wp	23	3/12/95
P171	W	Bl,TS,YS,SILx	Bl	Wp, SWp	19	7/12/95
P172	N	Y,BLx	Bl,BrLx	Wp	5	8/12/95
P173	N	F,T,Wh,Y,G	F,SILx	Wp	5 6 11 13	9/12/95
P174	W	BIM,RM,GM,WhM SILx,GILx,BrLx	Bl	Wp, SWp	23	9/12/95
P175	N	Y,Pu,Bl,SILx, GILx	Bl	Wp	6	13/12/95
P176	N	BLx,SILx,Wh	Bl	Wp	8 26	14/12/95
P177	N	GILx,GLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	24	16/12/95
P178	W	PuM,SILx,GILx,BLx	Bl	Wp	9	16/12/95
P179	W	TS,RS/BIS,GILx, SILx	Bl	Wp	1, 26	19/12/95
P180	W	OS,BLx, GLx,GILx,SILx	Bl	Wp	27	20/12/95
P181	N	F,BM,Bl,Wh,Y,SILx ,R,G, T	F	Wp	7	20/12/95



## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P182	N	C,Brown,GILx	C,GILx	Wp	1 15 24 25	22/12/95
P183	N	T,Wh,SILx,GILx	T	Wp	26	22/12/95
P184	W	B,R/RLx,G/GLx Y/GILx,Wh, SILx, C/BrLx	B	Wp	29 30	28/12/95
P185	W	Wh,B,GILx	Bl	Wp	8	3/1/96
P186	W	BrLx,Bg	Bg	Pl	1	24/12/95
P187	N	F,Wh,Y,Bl	F	Wp	17 28	6/1/96
P188	W	WhS,YS,GLx	Bl	Wp	4	31/12/95
P189	N	GM,YM,RM, SILx,PuLx,GLx, BrLx	Bl	Wp	29 30	9/1/96
P190	N	RM,WhM,GM	Bl	Wp	30	13/1/96
P191	W	RM,BM,YM	Bl	Wp	1	18/1/96
P192	N	GM,RM,YM,RLx	Bl	Wp	5	20/1/96
P193	N	YM,OM,BM, RM,WhM,GLx	Bl	Wp	6	20/1/96
P194	N	GM,WhM,RM,RLx	Bl	Wp	7	20/1/96
P195	N	Y,O,Br	Bg	Wp	25	
P196	W	YM,GM,RM,BM, SILx	Bl	Wp, SWp	1,719	22/1/96
P197	N	GLx,BrLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	2	27/1/96
P198	N	BLx,Y	Bl	Wp	4	27/1/96
P199	N	WhS,PuS,SILx,GIL x,RLx,GLx,BLx,TL x, PinkLx	Bl	Wp, SWp	26	27/1/96
P200	W	TS,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	15	27/1/96
P201	W	FM,WhM,YM,	F	Wp	29	27/1/96
P202	W	YM,BM,RLx,SILx	Y	SWp	17 19	6/2/96
P203	N	GLx,BLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	3	3/2/96
P204	N	Wh,G,BrLx	Bl	Wp	5	3/2/96

## Appendix A

Pattern No.	Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P205	W OM,BIM/GILx,YM TM/BLx,WhM/ SILx,G	OM	Wp	15	3/2/96
P206	W OM,PuM,BrLx	O	Wp	9	2/2/96
P207	N Pu,Y,O,R,GILx	Bl	Wp	25	7/2/96
P208	N BrLx,BLx,Bl	Y	Wp	30	7/2/96
P209	W BM,SILx,GILx,BIM ,WhM,BrLx	Bl	Wp	15	10/2/96
P210	N BrLx,R	Bl,GILx	Pl	12	10/2/96
P211	W WhS,PuM,BLx,SIL x,Glx,BrLx,GLx,TL x, PinkLx	Bl	Wp SWp	16	10/2/96
P212	W OS,BIM,WhM,SILx ,GILx,BrLx	O	Wp SWp	17	12/2/96
P213	N R,PuLx,GLx,SILx, BLx,RLx	Bl	Wp	28	15/2/96
P214	W GS,BIM,SILx,GILx, GS/WhS	Bl	Wp	15	15/2/96
P215	W Y,PuLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	2 3 7	15/2/96
P216	N TM,OM,TM/OM	Bl	Wp	15	23/2/96
P217	W TS,OS,B,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	25	25/2/96
P218a	N Y,Bl,GILx,PuLx,B Lx	Bl	Wp	23	25/2/96
P218b	N Y,Bl,GILx,PuLx,B Lx	Bl	Wp	15	25/2/96
P219	W BM,RM,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	28	25/2/96
P220	N O/SILx,GILx	O	Wp	24	27/2/96
P221	N BrLx,Bg	Bg, BrLx	Jq	1 5	1/3/96
P222	W Dk.BM,RoyalBM	Bl	Pl	28	2/3/96
P223	N Bg,SILx	Bg	Wp Op	1 2 5 6,23,2 5	10/3/96
P224	W GS,PinkS,BrLx	Bl	Wp	30	10/3/96
P225	N SILx,R	Bl GIL x	Wp	28	8/3/96
P226	N Wh,SILx,GILx	Wh, PuLx	Jq Wp	28	5/3/96

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P227	N	BLx,SILx,BI	Wh,BI	Wp Wf	27	5/3/96
P228	W	RS,BrS	R	Wp	24	11/3/96
P229	W	YS,SILx,PuLx	Y	Wp	28	11/3/96
P230	W	O,G,GILx	O	Wp	19	11/3/96
P231	W	RS	R	Pl	24	13/3/96
P232	W	F/BLx,Y/BLx,PuM/ GILx	BI	Wp	15	13/3/96
P233	W	RS,TS,YS,	BI	Wp	28	17/3/96
P234	N	Bg,GILx	Bg	Wp Op	9	17/3/96
P235	N	Y,BrLx,SILx	Bg	Wp	23	16/3/96
P236	W	BM,RM,Pink/GILx, DkGM,L. G/SILx, BrLx	BI	Wp	30	18/3/96
P237	W	F,BLx,SILx,Glx	F	Wp	30	12/3/96
P238	N	Wh,GILx	Wh,F, BI	Wp Wf SWf	1	12/3/96
P239	W	Pu,SILx,L.Pu	BI	Wp SWp	19	19/3/96
P240	W	BIS	BI	Pl	30	19/3/96
P241	N	Bg,BrLx	Bg	Op	23	22/3/96
P242	N	Wh,SILx	Wh	Op	17	23/3/96
P243	W	TS,SILx	T	Wp	30	25/3/96
P244	W	OS,BIS/BrLx	O	Wp	30	28/3/96
P245	N	T,Y,BI	BI,SILx	Wp	28	31/3/96
P246	W	BI,GILx	BI	Wp	19	29/3/96
P247	N	RLx,BI,BLx,	BI	Wp	12 13	31/3/96
P248	W	TS,YS,SILx,Brx, GILx	BI	Wp SWp	25	3/4/96
P249	N	YS,PuS,GILx,SILx	BI	Wp	25	4/4/96
P250	W	BM,BI,F,WhM, GILx,GLx,BLx	BI	Wp SWp	19	4/4/96
P251	N	YS,BS,GILx,SILx	BI	Wp	12	4/4/96
P252	N	SILx,Y	Y,PuLx	Jq	1	4/4/96
P253	N	BrLx,Bg	T	Pl	17	8/4/96
P254	N	G,Wh,BI,SILx, GILxG/Wh	BI	Wp	15	14/4/96

## Appendix A

Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P255	W	BM,BrLx	B	SWp Wp	25	4/4/96
P256	N	RLx,R	R,GILx	Pl	3	5/4/96
P257	W	Bl,BrLx,RM,YM, GM,WhM,RM/YM	Bl	Wp	25 26	12/4/96
P258	N	PuLx,BLx,GILx,Bl	Bl	Wp	27	12/4/96
P259	N	BM,SILx,GILx, PuLx,BLx	Bl	Wp	15	8/4/96
P260	W	BM,BIM,WhM, GILx	Bl	Wp	19	8/4/96
P261	W	BM,RM,YM,GM, PuLx,SILx,BrLx GILx,GLx	Bl	Bl	29	8/4/96
P262	N	F,SILx,Bl	F	Wp	15	12/4/96
P263	N	SILx,Bg	Bg	Op Wp	1 - 7, 11 13	12/4/96
P264	W	T,R/RLx,Y/GILx	T	Wp	29	19/4/96
P265	N	BrLx,GLx,Y	BrLx,Y	Jq	27	19/4/96
P266	W	RS,OS,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	28	19/4/96
P267	N	YM,BM,GILx	Bl	Wp	24	19/4/96
P268	W	YM,RM,BM,WhM, SILx	Y	Wp	2	20/4/96
P269	W	B,BLx	Bl	Wp	3	21/4/96
P270	W	PuM,SILx,Y	Bl	Wp SWp	13	21/4/96
P271	N	T,Wh,GILx	T,Wh	Wp Wf	23	21/4/96
P272	N	YM,GM/GILx,OM/ PuLx	Y	Wp	11	23/4/96
P273	N	YM,GM,SILx, GILx	Bl	Wp	12	23/4/96
P274	N	PuLx,SILx,Bl	Bl	Wp	3	23/4/96
P275	W	BS,BS/BIM,GILx, WhS	Bl	Wp	1	8/4/96
P276	W	OS,BIM,WhS/OS BrLx	O	Wp	29	26/4/96
P277	W	OS,WhS/SILx,BIS/G ILx,WhS/GILx	O	Wp	29	24/4/96
P278	N	F,T,BrLx	F	Wp	28	24/4/96
P279	N	GS,GILx,SILx	Bl	Wp	15	26/4/96
P280	W	TM,BIM/GILx,WhM /SILx,YM/GILx,G	Bl	Wp	29	2/5/96

## Appendix A

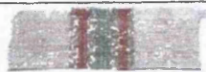



















Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P281	N	SILx,BLx,PuLx,TS, BrLx	T SILx	Wp	27	4/5/96
P282	W	PeachS	O	Pl	30	4/5/96
P283	N	T,Wh,GILx	T,SILx	Wp	25	4/5/96
P284	N	BLx,SILx,GLx,T	Bl	Wp	28	6/5/96
P285	N	C,Y,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	17	6/5/96
P286	N	C,T,Brown,SILx	Wh	Wp	24	7/5/96
P287	W	WhM,BM,GLx	Wh	SWp	29	8/5/96
P288	W	G,Wh,BronzeLx,Wh/ G,Glx,Bl	Bl	Wp	2 6	9/5/96
P289	N	Y,G/GLx,GILx	Bl	Wp	24	9/5/96
P290	N	Y,G,R,BrLx	Bl	Wp	24	28/4/96
P291	N	Wh,BLx,SILx	Bl,Wh	Wp Wf	24	30/4/96
P292	W	RLx,GLx,Y,Bl	Bl	Wp	30	10/5/96
P293	W	R,Y,SILx,GILx	Bl	Wp	28	9/5/96
P294	N	Y,B,GLx	Bl,SILx	Wp	27	10/5/96
P295	N	Y,F,Wh	F	Wp	2	12/5/96
P296	N	SILx,R	T	Wp	17	25/5/96
P297	N	GLx,Wh	Bl,SILx	Wp	2 3 6 7	20/5/96
P298	W	YM,GM,GILx	Bl	Wp SWp	25	10/5/96
P299	N	Wh,Pu,BrLx	Wh	Wp	23	10/5/96
P300	N	BrLx,GLx,Bl	Bl	Wp	1	17/5/96
P301	W	YM,GM,GILx	Wh	Wp SWp	19	17/5/96
P302	W	BM,SILx,WhM,Bl	Bl	Wp SWp	7	17/5/96
P303	N	Bg,Wh	Bg,Wh	Op SWf	1 11	20/5/96
P304	N	T,Bl,GILx,SILx	T	Wp	17	20/5/96
P305	W	WhM,GM,GILx	Wh,O	Swp SWf	23	22/5/96
P306	W	Y,G,GILx	Bl	Wp	19	22/5/96
P307	W	YM,WhM,SILx,BIM / GILx,GM/GLx	O	Wp	28	24/5/96
P308	W	GM,RM,GILx	Bl	Wp	30	25/5/96
P309	N	C,Brown,R,SILx	C	Wp	30	22/5/96
P310	W	C,GILx,BS	C	Wp SWp	19	25/5/96

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Pattern No.		Warp Colours	Weft	Technique	Loom	Date
P311	N	T/BLx,Y/GILxG/ GLx,R/RLx,Wh/ SILx,Wh/F	Bl	Wp	5	1/6/96
P312	W	OS,BIS/GILx,YS/ BrLx,BS	O	Wp	28	2/6/96
P313	W	OS,BIS/GILx,YS	O	Wp	29	2/6/96
P314	W	RS,GS,BIS,GILx	Bl	Wp	30	2/6/96
P315	W	RS,GS	Bl	Wp	30	5/6/96

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Patterns Woven at Ilé Èkejó Compound 7 June 1995 - 5 June 1996

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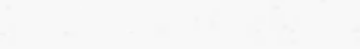
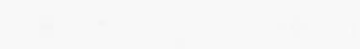

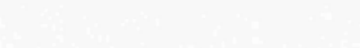


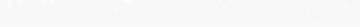


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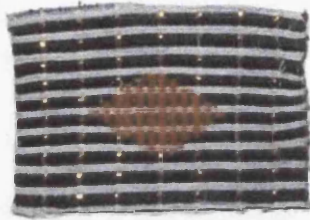
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## Appendix B

### Èkejó Compound:

### List of Weavers, Family Tree, Apprenticeship Documents

#### 1. List of Weavers June 1995 to June 1996

<u>Loom Number</u>	June 95 - Jan 96	Feb 96 -
L1	Kazeem Fasasi(Age 21)	Sakiru Wahab (13)
L2	Ishmael Fasasi (25)	Afeez Fasasi (15)
L3	Suliyat Moshood (16)	Yinusa Yusuf (13)
L4	Yusuf Rasak (15)	Yusuf Rasak (15)
L5	Isiaka Yusuf (17)	Isiaka Yusuf (17)
L6	Nurudeen Yusuf (16)	Nurudeen Yusuf(16)
L7	Kazeem Hammed (16)	Kazeem Hammed(16)
L8	Lukuman Yusuf (20)	Not in use
L9	Kehinde Yusuf (20)	Kamorudeen Yekini(16)
L10	Not in use	Not in use
L11	Rasheed Oguntowo (17)	Rasheed Oguntowo (17)
L12	Muideen Belawu (15)	Muideen Belawu (15)
L13	Jelili Yusuf (14)	Jelili Yusuf (14)
L14	Kamorudeen Yekini (16)	Not in use
L15	Afeez Fasasi (15)	Lukuman Yusuf (20)
L16	Sakiru Wahab (13)	Not in use
L17	Waidi Fasasi (20)	Kehinde Yusuf (20)
L18	Yinusa Yusuf (13)	Not in use
L19	Nurudeen Ademola Yusuf (24)	Nurudeen Ademola Yusuf (24)
L20 - L22	Not in use	
L23	Mumini Yusuf (19)	Mumini Yusuf (19)
L24	Abudu Muritala (20)	Abudu Muritala (20)
L25	Morufu Ajekigbe (23)	Morufu Ajekigbe (23)
L26	Wasiu Ajibade (20)	Wasiu Ajibade (20)
L27	Afeez Ajekigbe (14)	Afeez Ajekigbe (14)
L28	Idris Oladele (15)	Idris Oladele (15)
L29	Hamodu Kasali (19)	Hamodu Kasali (19)
L30	Saidi Rasak (15)	Saidi Rasak (15)
L31 - L36	Not in use	

Looms 1 to 26 are supervised by Alhaji Moshood Fasasi, Looms 27 to 36 by Alhaji Rasak Kareem. At the start of February 1996, at the conclusion of Ramadan, a number of the trained weavers left Alhaji Moshood's group leading to a reallocation of looms as indicated. At the end of July 1995 loom



## Appendix B

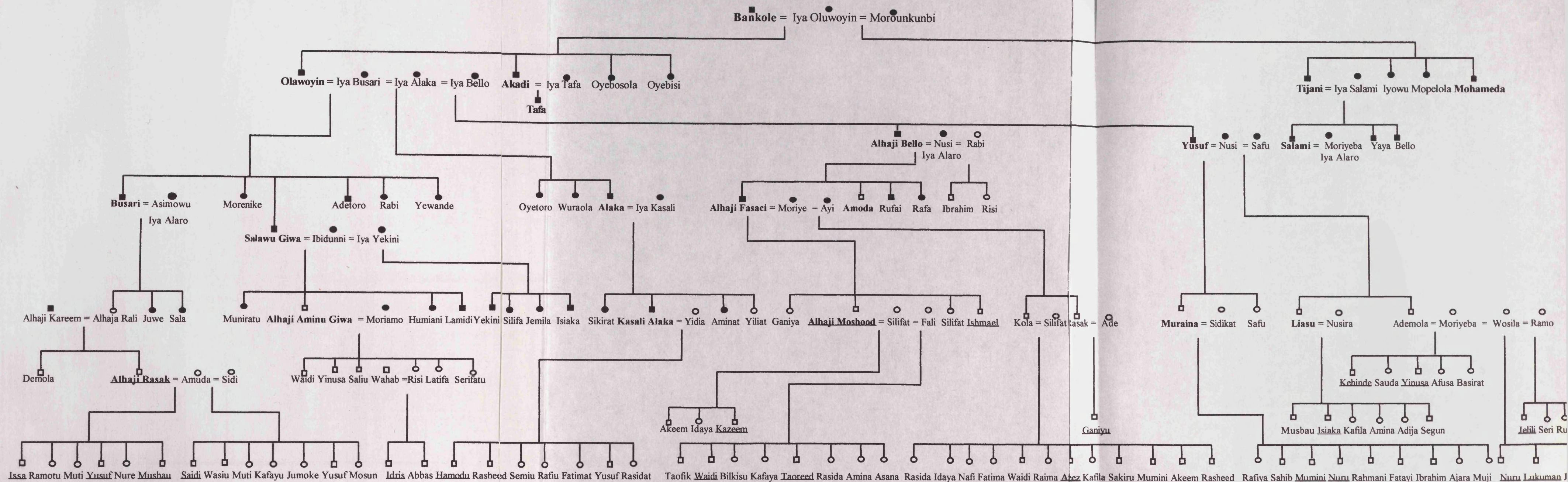
34 was used for several weeks by Muideen, a maternal relative of Alhaji Rasak who normally works in Lagos.

As of June 1995 there were a further ten workers preparing thread for the weavers but not weaving themselves. One of these, Issa (aged 22) was a fully trained weaver but did not normally weave for health reasons. Another, Basirat (15) was a sister of one of the wives of the compound, visiting from Ibadan for several months. The remainder were younger male trainees, aged between 11 and 14.



## FAMILY TREE OF EKEJO COMPOUND RESIDENTS (1995-96)

3. Family Tree Showing Residents of Ekejo Compound:

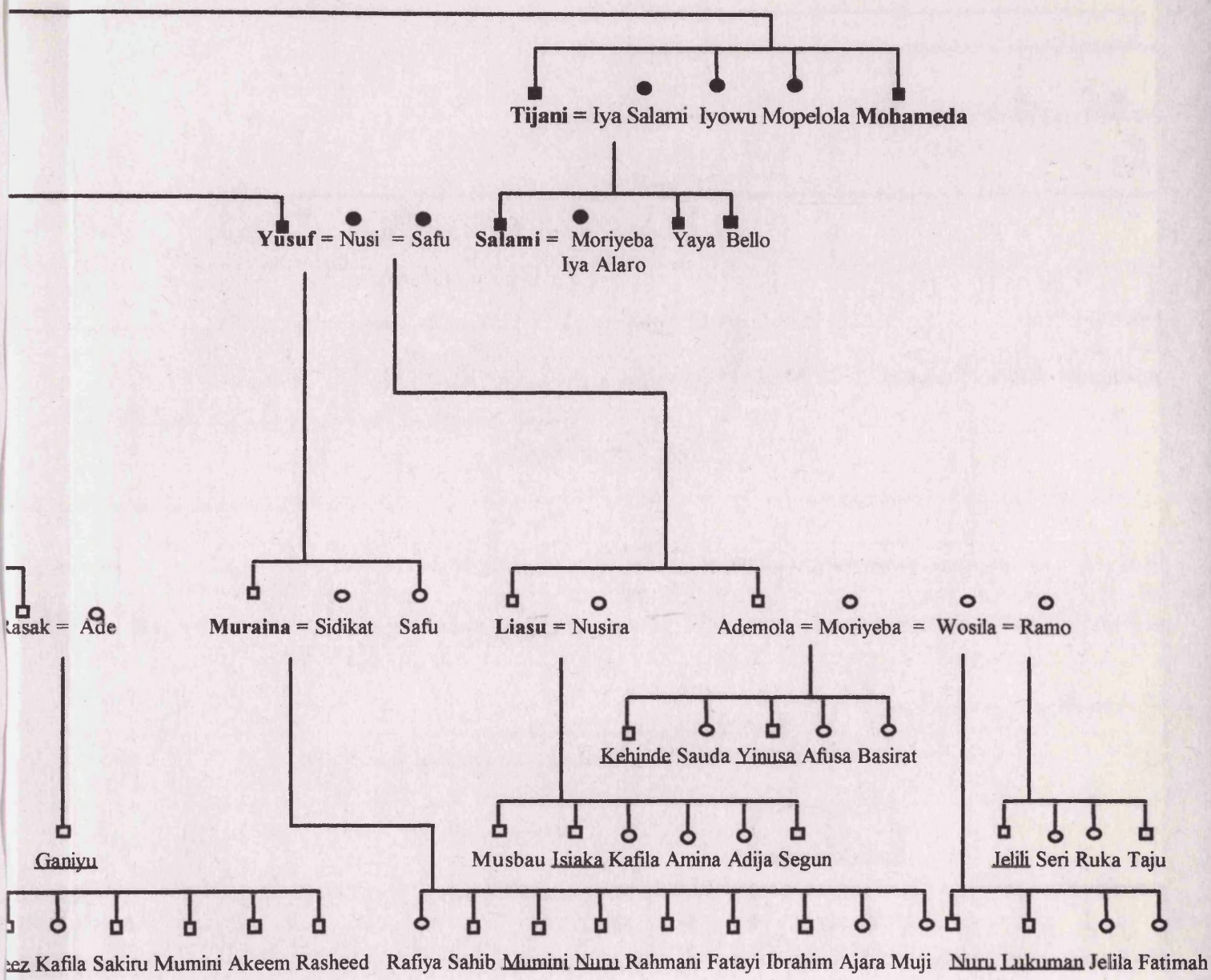


## KEY TO TABLE:

<b>bold</b>	Master Weaver
<u>underlined</u>	Active weaver in 1995-96
Iya Alaro	Indigo dyer
○	Female
□	Male
=	Married to
■ ●	Deceased

Note: Women marrying into a Yoruba compound are addressed as "Iyawo" i.e. "bride" until the birth of their first child, after which they will be known as "Iya ....", i.e. "Mother of ....". In many cases the actual name of brides of the compound in previous generations was no longer remembered, so the formula "Iya ....." has been used here.



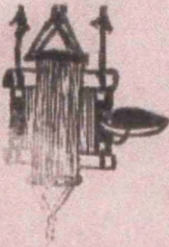


Kafila Sakiru Mumini Akeem Rasheed Rafiya Sahib Mumini Nurur Rahmani Fatayi Ibrahim Ajara Muji Nurur Lukuman Jelila Fatimah

## Appendix B

### 3. Apprenticeship Contracts and Freedom Certificate From Èkejó Compound

#### A. Apprenticeship Contract - Yoruba version.



**MOSHUD FASASI**  
Alias:- BABA HAKEEM  
Expert in all Native Clothes, Fancy Cloth and different types of Ibaasa e.g. Olukun and Others.  
Home Address :- Ekejo's Compound, Box 271 Isale Oja. \*  
Tel. 038-230612. Oyo.

**IWE ADEHUN OMO ISE**

Eni \_\_\_\_\_

Gba lati je Omo ise ni aye ile ise ti nruko re wa ni oke yi fun Odu \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_ bere lati Ojo \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_

Pe mo gba lati ma wa si ibi ise dede yala ni ile ise ni tabi ni eke re ti won fi mi si.

Pe Ologbese eleri lati san Owo ikose tise \_\_\_\_\_ Naira ( N : K ) Eyi ti n n san die nibe bayi ti n o si san iyoku ki ariko mi to pe tabi nigba ti mo ba fe gba Ominira ti ise \_\_\_\_\_ Naira ( N : K ) Ti mo ba kuna lati san owo yi Oga mi le gba igbese ti o to lati ri pe n ri owo te gba pelu owo nkan ti mo ba ba je lenu ise yi nipase hwa kokan mi ni owo awon nbi mi.

Ile ise yi ko gba mi pe ki ore mi wa si ndo mi ni enu ise, bakanna ni a ko pe ki n ma gba ise lati se, eyi le ja si ki won le mi lo ni ibi ise yi.

Pe mo gbodo le olufara sise oniteriba, pelu iwa jeje si awon asiwaju mi, Onibara a i awon Alase ni ibi ise wa.

Pe ke si awawo fun eni ti a ba mu pe a jale tabi ti o se orikunkun si awon alase ni ibi ise yi tabi huwa arufin si igoba.

Pe gbogbo ofin yi ni won ka si mi lati ti o si yemi daada mo si gba lati tete nipa fiti owo si iwe yi pelu awon eleri wonyi.

\_\_\_\_\_ Omo ise \_\_\_\_\_ Oga ise \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Eleri \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B

### B. Apprenticeship Contract - English Version



## MOSHUD FASASI

Alias:- BABA HAKEEM

Expert in all Native Clothes, Fancy Cloth and different types of Idaso e. g. Oluken and Others.

Home Address :- Ekejo's Compound, Box 271 Isale Gje,  
Tel. 038-230612. Oyo.

### APPRENTICE AGREEMENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agreed to be an  
Apprentice under the above named COMPANY for the period of \_\_\_\_\_ year  
That he/she is a native of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ State

The Trainee agreed to attend his/her duties regularly, either in our head Office  
or any of our Branches. That the said Apprentice promised to pay the sum of  
Naira and \_\_\_\_\_ kobo (N : K) for the trainee course and  
that the advance paid was \_\_\_\_\_ Naira \_\_\_\_\_ kobo.

He/She will pay the balance before end of his/her course in case of trainee  
f ill to complete the period of Apprenticeship he/she shall pay to the master  
the sum of \_\_\_\_\_ Naira \_\_\_\_\_ kobo (N : K) yet to be balanced

A breach of agreement and failing to pay the said amount, the master may be  
compelled to institute legal action to recover the amount plus the cost, the said  
Apprentice agreed to refund the cost of damaged material through carelessness.

The COMPANY will not entertain your engagement or any kind of private jobs during  
the business hours violating of this rule may result to heavy penalty in and form of sum-  
mary dismissal.

The Apprentice should conduct himself/herself in respective manners to both the mas-  
ter's customers and seniors.

That the master may dismiss the Apprentice without hesitation if he/she is caught  
with stealing, disobeying higher authority in the workshop and illegal habit.

That the contents of this agreement were well read and understood and we signatories  
agreed entirely on all the terms.

Dated this \_\_\_\_\_ Day of \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_\_\_

Apprentice Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Master's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### C. Freedom Certificate.

**M. FASASI & SONS.**  
Alias :- BABA HAKEEM  
Expert in all Native Clothes, Fancy Cloth, and different types  
of Idasa, e.g. Olokun and Others  
HOME ADDRESS :- Ekeja's Compound, Box 271, Adesina Street Isale Oja Oyo.  
Phone:- 033-230812.

 **CERTIFICATE**  
**Of Apprenticeship**

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

M. ....  
Has been under my Tuition as an Apprentice Native Cloth Weaving  
for the period of ... Years ... Months

During the period of his/her Apprenticeship he/  
she proved himself/herself to be Honest, Obedient,  
Trustworthy, Diligent, Hardworking, Respectful,  
and Pains-taking.

I THEREFORE RECOMMEND HIM/HER TO ANYONE WHO NEED  
HIS/HER SERVICES.

Date of Engagement .....

Conduct .. Date of Leaving .....

Apprentice's Sign. Master's Sign.



## Appendix C

### Samples of Ewe Cloth Woven in Lagos

All samples were woven by a group of Ewe weavers in the Lagos suburb of Ikotun, managed by the master weaver Prosper Tetteh. They were collected in February and March 1996 from the weavers stock of cloth strips woven over the previous year. It was not possible to allocate dates or specific weavers to the samples.

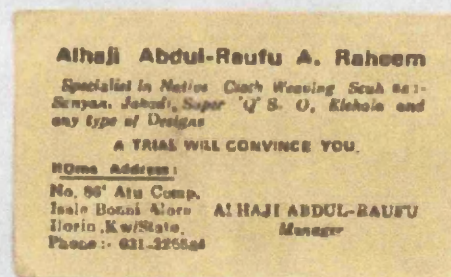
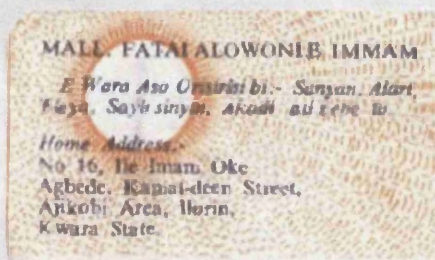
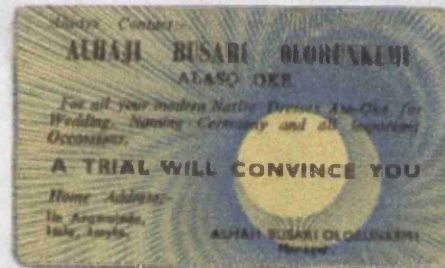
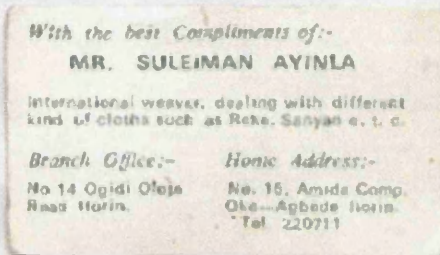
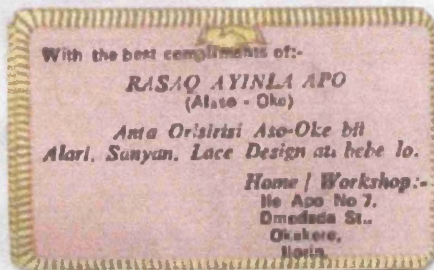
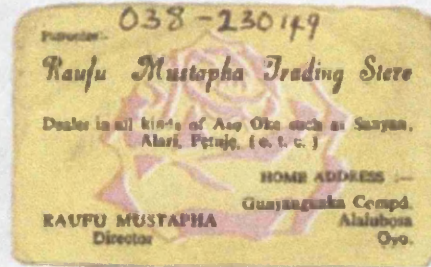
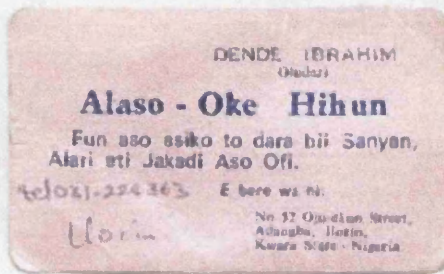


## Appendix C





## A Selection of Weavers' Business Cards



## Appendix E

### List of Interviewees cited with date of first interview.

#### Weavers:

- Mr. S.Adeniyi, Òyó, 10/11/1995.  
Mr. Kameel Agbaje, Òyó, 12/7/1996.  
Mrs. Juliana Ajayi, Sakí, 23/1/1996.  
Alfa Amoda, Òyó, 25/5/1996  
Deacon Falodun, Òyó, 7/2/1996.  
Alhaji Gbeko, Ìsẹ̀yìn, 12/12/1995.  
Alhaji Isiaka, Òyó, 16/1/1996.  
Alhaji Kegunhe, Ìsẹ̀yìn, 17/1/1996.  
Mr Francis Kpogoe, Ikotun Ijegun, 2/2/1996  
Mrs. Adeoti Ladigbolu, Òyó, 16/1/1996.  
Mr Abdulrasak Obaşekore, Òyó, 28/11/1995  
Mrs Odutayo, Lagos, 30/1/1996  
Mrs. Wemimo Ogunkunle, Ìbàdàn, 2/11/1995.  
Alhaja Mariamo Oloruntobi, Ìbàdàn, 22/2/1996  
Alhaji Olorunkemi, Ìsẹ̀yìn, 15/2/1996  
Alhaji Oriolowo Olatunji, Òyó, 17/7/1995.  
Alhaji Oyesade, Sakí, 23/1/96  
Mr. Rasheed Tafa, Òyó, 21/12/1995.  
Mr Prosper Tetteh, Lagos, 3/1/1996

#### Traders:

- Alhaja Balogun, Alhaja R.Balogun, Alhaji Ganiyu Balogun, Lagos, 19/5/1996.  
Hajia Muhammed, Lagos, 6/3/1996  
Mrs. John, Lagos, 9/4/ 1996  
Chief (Mrs) Owolana, Lagos, 6/1/1996.

#### Others:

- Chief (Mrs) Dada, Lagos, 13/5/1996.  
Alhaja Rali Kareem, Òyó, 2 /4/96  
Chief Şobande, Lagos, 13/3/96  
Chief Francis Taiwo, Ikarún of Òyó, Òyó, 12/6/96.

## Appendix E

### Other Formal Interviews not cited:

#### Weavers:

Mr Adelere, Iséyìn, 15/2/1996  
Alhaji Aminu, Òyó, 23/3/1996  
Alhaji Atanda, Òyó, 10/11/1995  
Alhaji Moshood Fasasi, Òyó, 26/5/1996  
Alhaji Kadir, Ilorin, 16/4/1996  
Alhaji Rasak Kareem, Òyó, 16/7/1995  
Alhaji Karimu, Ogbómòṣó, 18/4/1996  
Alhaji Ojulare, Ilorin, 24/2/1996  
Alhaji Olanrewaju, Ilorin, 16/4/1996  
Alhaji Amoda Rufai, Òyó, 22/4/1996

#### Traders:

Mrs A.Oladele, Lagos, 5/3/1996  
Mrs D.Akinyele, Ibàdàn, 12/5/1996  
Mrs. O. Ogundiya, Lagos, 5/3/1996  
Mrs Y. Ogundipe, Lagos, 4/1/1996

#### Others:

Mrs P.Agbakwu, Lagos, 31/1/1996  
Chief Esola Akano, Baṣòrun of Òyó, 12/6/1996  
Chief Lamidi Ogundiya Iroko, Aṣípade of Òyó (a senior hunter's title),  
30/6/1996  
Chief Lasisi Jokanola, Bàbá Iyájí of Òyó, 13/6/1996  
Mrs Odekanyin, Òyó, 10/6/1996  
Mrs Ogunmola, Òyó, 19/10/1995  
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